

Larp Against Fascism - Women of Color in Nordic Larp - Hungarian Proto-Larp - Chinese Larp

# DISTANCE OF TOUCH

The Knutpunkt 2022 Magazine

**In-Game Sex!**

**Online Larp  
The Birth of a New  
Artform**

**Feeling Glamorous  
That's What Larp Is For!**

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# EDITORIAL

Putting together a magazine for Knutpunkt 2022 means engaging with the community and as larpers the concept of an emergent theme is surely not strange to us! The theme rising out of all the article proposals coming from the community was, well, community.

Many different kinds of subjects related to the Nordic larp community are discussed in these pages, from the experiences of trans players to what it's like to be a woman and a Person of Color in the world of larp.

In the last few years I've seen smaller larp projects that have sought to engage with communities other than our own and thus take larp to new people. One example is the larp *Finding Tom* in 2020 in Helsinki. Collaborating with Pride, they were able to reach first time larpers from the Finnish queer community.

We all know that the toolbox of larp is extraordinarily powerful. By taking it to new places, new people, new institutions we can not only spread the joy, but also perhaps learn something new ourselves.

- Juhana Pettersson,  
Helsinki



Juhana Pettersson at the larp *The Secrets We Keep*.  
Photo: Kai Simon Fredriksen



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# MASTERING CHAOS

Text: Juhana Pettersson

## Let's ask the Knutpunkt 2022 head organizer Sofie Falk frivolous questions!

The head organizers for Knutpunkt 2022 are **Sofie Falk** and **Elina Andersson**. Falk is a 20 year veteran of larp. She has organized children's larp in Denmark, co-organized the Swedish larp *Coven* and been part of the crews for several Knutepunkts, the Danish conventions Forum and Fastaval, among other things. Apart from larp, she spends time gardening and walking her dog.

**Do you have a favorite Knutpunkt memory?**

One of my favorite moments was at the Hour of the Rant at Knutpunkt 2014, where two Palestinians ranted about toilets and toilet paper. It was hilarious. I almost peed myself from laughing.

**What's your most frivolous reason to organize Knutpunkt?**

It's to try and master chaos - there is something extremely satisfying in finalizing the room sorting, which in my opinion is a very tricky, and the most chaotic, task, since there are a lot of... opinions to consider.

**What's your most serious reason to organize Knutpunkt?**

I'm good at it - or at least I think so myself. I could say "to give back" or "to do something for the community" and whilst those reasons are also true in some form, I like doing things I'm good at, and I'm good at organizing Knutpunkt.

**What's the most ridiculous thing that has ever happened to you in a larp?**

I unintentionally and unwillingly became some sort of Saturday Demon at a *College of Wizardry* larp. It's so cringe that I sometimes think about it at night and just want to bury myself from shame.

**What's your favorite larp mistake, the one you keep repeating?**

I swear a lot off-game, and it kinda bleeds into my characters. Always, even when I try not to. And sometimes it's just really hard to find alternative phrases instead of

good ol' "fuckshit."

**What's the quality you have as a larper that you're most proud of?**

I can say 'no' to things I'm not interested in and know my limitations (when I need to eat, drink, sleep). I rarely do anything I don't want to, and I think that's a good quality.



Sofie Falk in the larp *Blodsband*.  
 Photo: Caroline Holgersson



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# 6 LARP NOVELS

(AND A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES)

Text: Jukka Särkijärvi

While larp crosses physical and cultural boundaries, language remains a barrier. Both language learning and petitioning publishers to commission translations are fine hobbies.

A novel about a Finnish boy who believes himself to be the Second Coming. The depictions of larp are only embarrassing when they capture that overflowing teenage enthusiasm too authentically, and we can only shake our heads, thankful we're past that. Aren't we?

## 6 STEFANI DEOUL: ON A LARP

A young adult novel about a murder mystery, lesbians, and steampunk larp in New York. Written in an exhaustingly giddy style, it also features the New York Public Library Main Branch as a larp venue.

## 1 ANNA JÄNSSON: NÄR SKÖNHETEN KOM TILL BRO ("WHEN BEAUTY CAME TO BRO")

A novel in the Maria Wern series. The main murder plot revolves around Wisby by Night, a bad *Vampire* larp. In the tradition of roleplay narratives written by people from the outside, in- and off-game keep getting mixed up.

## 3 ERIK SONNE (ED.): HEXBLOOD TALES, VOLUME 1

A collection of 10 short stories and a poem, set in the world of *College of Wizardry*. When a larp inspires such further creative outbursts, you know that at least *something* went right.

## 7 HAGEN TRONJE GRÜTZMACHER & JANE STEINBRECHER: GLUTBRINGER ("BRINGER OF EMBERS")

An epic fantasy novel based on the ten-thousand-player *Mythodea* fantasy larp in Germany. Aggravatingly, not available as an ebook.

## 4 VIRPI HÄMEEN- ANTTILA: SOKKOPELI ("BLIND GAME")

A detective story, a mystery where the youthful games of the middle-aged protagonists return to haunt them. The novel features a game that is enough like a larp for the book to note that it is not quite a larp.



## 2 MIKE POHJOLA: IHMISEN POIKA ("THE SON OF MAN")

## 5 LYRA KOLI: BLÖDNINGEN ("THE BLEEDING")

The title evokes the dual meanings of menstruation and bleed. The book discusses the body, larp, and literature, and dropped me out of my chair when I realized it was describing a game I was at.





# Q&A

Text: Juhana Pettersson

## Our readers asked questions and we turned to the community for answers!

**I keep seeing more non-men than men doing fantastic new stuff in the local scenes, but more men than women in paid work. How did we get here and what can we do to change?**  
- Anonymous

As in the rest of society, we tend to see more men in higher positions, more women in volunteer work and men getting more attention for their achievements.

We need to recognise women and non-binary people at least as

often as men. Encourage, listen, nudge and if we are in positions of power, make seats at the table.

- Miriam Lundqvist, founder of LajvVerkstaden

**Period larps terrify me as I'm shit at costuming. I realize that one can do a lot with a few larp-specific key items if one has a solid enough base. But what are the basic pieces that everyone wanting to portray dudes of the last 200 years should have in their**

**closet? If I were to splurge on like five key items what should they be?**  
- Basic Bro #7

Oh boy, you should ask a proper historical costumer, not this fake-it-till-you-make-it larper! Plus "the last 200 years" is a long time with lots of fashion changes for men, and not every social class will wear the same stuff! But anyway, here are my Five Fake Favorites:

1. A fancy waistcoat that doesn't look like it's made of polyester.

If you keep a modern jacket wide open at all times (for example, by holding the sides with your hands, or resting your thumbs in the pockets of the waistcoat), all you see is the waistcoat. Make sure it has an adjustable strap in the back to allow for body fat changes over time.

2. Non-denim darkish gray trousers with a very high waist. Most modern trouser waists are way too low, so they make waistcoats look like shit.

3. A pocket watch with a long chain. Cheap fakes are okay, but take one that isn't too shiny and actually tells you the time, so you don't have to discreetly look at your phone during the larp. Useful for everyone from Phileas Fogg to Thomas Shelby.

4. A silk cravat with a strong - not neon - color. The cravat came back into fashion in the 1960s, you can even use it to play a smarmy playboy in the 2020s. Plus if you bend and iron the collar of any regular modern

shirt, people will think you got a historical broken-collar shirt thanks to the cravat. Whatever your neck size, make sure the cravat is long enough that you can do a puffy knot and still stick the ends in your fancy waistcoat.

5. A top hat that actually fits your head size, doesn't look like just cardboard or cheap felt, and isn't too tall. You're going for historical-ish, not Alice in Wonderland's Mad Hatter. Thanks to *Peaky Blinders*, cheap



Solving problems in the larp *Odysseus*.  
Photo: Viima Strengell





A young Ukrainian larper participating at a Rollespilsakademiet event.  
Photo: Charles Bo Nielsen

caps for lower class characters are easy to come by, but good top hats are harder.

Warning: If you wear all 5, add a monocle, a 'stache and a cane, some people will call you Mr. Monopoly.  
- Thomas B., a French larper

**What do you think is the strongest example of Discovery (where the game is uncharted territory) or Challenge (the game as an obstacle course) aesthetics in Knutepunkt larps? These are major themes in the U.K. tradition I play, and I'm interested in seeing other approaches to delivering that sort of fun. There's a lot of focus on Narrative and Fantasy aesthetics in Nordic larp, and I wonder what other niches exist.**

**I tend to use the MDA game design framework for describing different types of fun, as I find it's**

**more precise than GNS theory, which tends to lean on how a game does things, rather than where many of the types of entertainment value are. It's quite widely used in computer game design scholarship, and I find that field to be an excellent source of inspiration for larps too.**  
- Jim Blackshaw

The large Finnish / Nordic style blockbuster larp *Odysseus*, played in 2019, had both of these themes in the core of its design. The *Battlestar Galactica* inspired larp focused on the survival of the human race where players needed to constantly solve problems both at individual level and on a larger scale.

The larp ran around the clock, paced with a mechanic where a jump to a new location was required every three hours. Land teams were sent

to recover beacons that contained puzzles which scientists needed to solve to discover the coordinates for the next beacon. Bridge crew and fighter pilots needed to fight off enemy ships to give time for the engineers to prepare for the next jump and fix the broken ship.

A lot of different puzzles, obstacles and problems were constantly present for different character groups and they all worked together to keep the larger wheel turning continuously for 48 hours. During the larp a lot of lore about the history of the enemy and the past of human civilization was also discovered and this influenced the decisions that players needed to make towards the end of the larp.  
- Laura Kröger, *Odysseus* 2019 producer and story lead

**What's the demographics of larping in the Nordic countries, especially with regard to age and gender? Are we lagging behind in recruitment?**  
- Anonymous

The country in the most critical situation is Norway, with very limited events and limited recruitment. It seems they have a great diverse group of people, but not enough new people coming in to sustain themselves. Many of their vital recruitment efforts are done by sole riders burning themselves out over only a few years.

Norway has been doing a good job at building international collaborations and has gotten people to come to Norway to help out with sustaining themselves. I would say they need a serious revamp with more beginner friendly larps and really

credit and support the people making them.

Denmark and Sweden have by now quite the organizational capacity to support organizations and people doing projects, helping them to guide and focus their efforts towards what is needed for the community to thrive. A whole lot of people larp in Denmark and Sweden, there are many kids' larps and many new players joining all the time and finding their way into Nordic larp.

My main experience is with Rollespilsfabrikken where they have almost weekly children larps run with hundreds of kids. Once the kids grow old enough, some of them are recruited into running the children's larps themselves to keep it going. The people running the children's larps are given a lot of respect and their priorities weigh heavily on the organization as a whole.

Rollespilsfabrikken is the biggest, but there are many similar organizations in Denmark that are building around making children larps and then over time recruit those children into youth leader positions similar to what scouts do. As they become older they are invited to "orkerne kommer sommerskole." Many of them go to Østerskov or EPOS and are invited to conferences like Forum and Fastaval to keep them invested.  
- Charles Bo Nielsen, larp facilitator

Finnish larpers have a wide age range nowadays. I have seen three years old larps and 70 years old larps even though the average is probably around 35 years old.

In my view there are more kids and teens interested in larping than ever because many larpers who have grown up wanted to make larps especially for them to give them the opportunity to get to know this amazing hobby with its endless adventures. We also have many larps for young larpers which we are bringing to schools, youth centers

and libraries where they naturally spend time so it's easy for them to participate.

I think the gender division among larpers is quite equal at every age group and most of the larps also takes into account non-binary players so they can feel safe and play characters of any gender, including outside the binary. This is truly a hobby for everyone regardless of age or gender!

We could have more larps just for teens and kids because they are interested in different themes and playstyles than grownups. We could also teach them more about how to make larps. They know best themselves what themes they'd like to explore. So if we are lagging behind somehow it's about encouraging youth to make their own larps, so they're not limited to the role of a player.

- Mira Suovanen, co-founder of Todellisuuspakolaiset ry and CEO of Ulottuvuusmatkat Oy

**How do you win larp in the bestest way?**  
- Anonymous

The most conventional way to win a Nordic larp is to have a lot of (official) photos taken of you in character, and that everyone talks about your excellent play at the afterparty. But this is not the bestest way.

If the larp made an important impact on you and your life, and you manage to co-create that impact with other participants as well - you have won the larp in the bestest way.

A third way, for some, to win the larp is to have tons of bleed from the strongest emotions, eventually leading to having a hook-up or a long-term partner after the larp.  
- Hanne Grasmø, larp designer □





Anna Erlandsson at the larp *Witches of Åstad Farm*.  
Photo: Anna Erlandsson

# NOT ALL BLACK AND WHITE

Text: Anna Erlandsson

**How it is to be a woman of  
color in the larp scene?**





## **Dear non-Person of Color (PoC) larper**

**We are not here to give you all the answers on how to solve racism. Neither will we be able to give you one coherent answer for you to use on questions on how to make the larp community better.**

**We are four Women of Color (WoC) with different backgrounds and different reasons for why we love larping.**

**We are not the same but we have one thing in common: we all want to see the larp community change for the better and be a bit less oblivious towards racist structures.**

**With this article, we invite you to sit with us, listen and remember our words and stories.**



So, who are we and what do we do when we are not larping?

**Aina:** My name is **Aina Skjønsvell**. In my everyday life, I work as a translator and have done for 10 years now. I have a degree in languages and linguistics. Oh, and I live in Norway!

**Liselle:** I’m **Liselle Awwal**, and I live in Denmark. I am a self-employed crafter with a webshop with a lot of nerdy things!

**Jonaya:** My name is **Jonaya Kemper** and I’m a Nebula Award winning game designer and an instructor of game design at Carnegie Mellon University in the US. In addition to that, I am known for some of my theories on identity transformation using role playing games.

**Anna:** I’m **Anna Erlandsson** from Sweden. I work with digital games and have a burning passion for making the gaming culture more inclusive.

The four of us have larped for over 20 years and it’s breathtaking to think that we have done this hobby for so long. But what made us start larping?

**Anna:** For me, it was a longing to play fantasy for real. I read a lot as a kid and I was drawn to the fantasy bookshelf in the library. I read these magical stories and so wanted to be a part of them myself. When I was a teenager, I discovered that there was a thing called larp and as soon as I turned 18, I went to my first one. I have never looked back.

**Liselle:** Just as Anna, I was an avid reader from childhood, particularly of fantasy books. Once I got online in the early nineties, I started roleplaying online. It was a random segment on television, just before the turn of the century, which revealed the larp world to me: a brief clip of a fantasy larp in a forest. I was immediately obsessed, and upon discovering that my cousin was a larper, introductions were made.

**Aina:** I wanted to be a goth vampire and wear vampire clothes! My goth friend told me that she and her goth boyfriend played *Vampire: the Masquerade* not too far from where I lived and that I should absolutely join. So I had my grandmother sew me an all black, medieval-inspired “period” piece of the finest polyester fabric and off I went to drink red wine and look pretty.

**Jonaya:** I love to dress up and play pretend, and I have trained for my entire life in improvisational theater. A very close friend of mine, **Noxweiler**, suggested I give it a try as he loved it. I always said no to larping, because as a Black person in the U.S. we don’t tend to go to a secluded area unless we trust everyone involved. I know it sounds absurd, but this is very true. There is a real pattern of Black people dying on innocuous trips. Many large U.S. based larps are boffer campaigns taking place in forested areas, and this isn’t always accessible or safe. I trusted Nox, but not everyone



Anna Erlandsson at the 5th Fairweather Manor.  
Photo: Nadina Dobrowolska

involved. Nox basically had to show me that no one would try to murder me, in order for me to go. He actually had to say: “There will be other Black people.” It worked, and here I am today. **Dr. Diana Shippey** was actually the first person I saw there and it made me feel a lot more relaxed.

Over the years, we have tried a lot of different styles of larp, from Nordic Larp to blockbuster larps and we all have different types of characters we prefer to play.

**Liselle:** Ohh, I very deliberately try to bounce between characters that are very different, but I often have the most fun with scheming manipulators.

**Aina:** It depends on the larp, I enjoy playing a leader a lot, or a villain. That being said, I have greatly enjoyed playing Thug #3, The Mad Scientist and even The Vapid (but pretty) Princess. I can find joy and fun in almost any character if I can play with good people at a good larp

**Jonaya:** In general I like to play any character I can learn from or learn things with. Or the ones I am most disallowed from being in actual society. My favorite role genuinely was an NPC. I played Death in the U.K. run of *Just a Little Lovin’*, and this was perhaps my favorite role of all time.

**Anna:** I either like to be very different from myself, like a visual pretty

teenage princess or super cool ranger, or I like to create a lot of pain and drama for my co-players – with full consent of course! In the latter case, I love playing characters that are in the background but at the same time have all the power.

Besides being larpers, we have done different things in our communities and on the international level that we will now brag about!

**Aina:** I am proud of being a name many people recognise in the world of larp, both as a larper (some even say that I’m good – I am one of those people) and as a voice for larpers of color. The fact that people have come to me for advice on inclusivity



Liselle Awwal at The Last Song, by Avalon Larp Studio & Yxengard.  
Photo: Henrik B. Hansen



is always something I’m proud of and grateful for, even if I don’t always have the ability and/or spoons to help out.

**Jonaya:** Despite the actual psychological harm it caused to me personally, I would say my biggest achievement is fighting as much as I can for the inclusion of people of color in fantasy, which led to me coming up with my theory of emancipatory bleed. I didn’t know how much the theory has helped people, but I think I am more proud of this than any of my other work. I love helping people.

**Liselle:** There are larps I have organized that I am proud of, but I am also proud to have developed my crafting skills to a level where I can monetize them. The making of things is the fun part, and selling them enables me to spend as much time crafting as I want.

**Anna:** I feel so proud over how much I speak up for inclusion for PoC in larp and in the gaming hobby. That I have also been able to push this on a national level and talk about it abroad gives me hope that perhaps it will make it easier for other PoC after me.

**We are from different countries, Anna from Sweden, Liselle from Denmark, Aina from Norway and Jonaya from the U.S. What are our experiences when larping in our home countries and being a Woman of Color?**

**Liselle:** Oh god, it is frequently exhausting, being one of less than a handful of PoC in my local community, and frequently at larger international larps or events. Sometimes lonely, if difficult debates surrounding marginalization are attempted, as it is very easy for my voice to be drowned out by a multitude of dismissive ones.

**Jonaya:** While I am grateful for the people who have helped me find

success, for me, it has been genuinely awful. If I did not truly believe that larp was an excellent tool for liberation I would stop. I have many privileges being a U.S. citizen, but it was very difficult to get death threats for my work and to be accused of perpetrating “cancel culture”. I have been doxxed. I have been lied to. I have had other larpers scream in my face while running larps. It can be very exhausting honestly, and I am one of the more well known faces. Marginalized people also face representational burnout, i.e. we have to be a perfect presentation of a human and any slip up can toss us out. So there’s a feeling that we must present perfectly while facing enormous scrutiny.

**Anna:** In the beginning, I did not think about it so much, mostly cause I was so happy to be able to larp. But it has been exhausting at times to both be one of the few WoC and a very loud voice about diversity and inclusion. I have mostly gotten small “well-intended” comments but it is the ignorance towards racist structures and how... *white* the larps hobby is in it’s thinking that really drains me

**Aina:** Well, it is better now, as I am older and meaner and give fewer forks. But you rarely escape a “well-intentioned” “compliment” or an action/question that is a micro-aggression. They’re least daily at events.

**There are few PoC in our larp scenes and we four found each other in recent years. Have we felt supported by other PoC in the larping community during the years?**

**Aina:** I think the larp community as a whole is too big with too many cultures to say only yes to that. Obviously not all PoC will support me, as I probably will not support all PoC. And I don’t always need support. But I try to focus more on the support I get from the people around me than the

support I don’t get.

**Anna:** I have felt so much support from other PoC in larp during the years but at the same time, we come from such different backgrounds that it is impossible for us to agree on all things. I have way different experiences and opinions from some PoC and that is just as it should be and sometimes, the clashes are real.

**Liselle:** Yes, and no. Several years ago, I joined the newly created “Larpers of Color” group on Facebook. It was purportedly a global network, but since the vast majority of members were U.S. larpers, my experience was that my perspective as a European PoC was often ignored or dismissed. I was excited for such a group to exist in theory, but in reality it became a stressor to the point that I left. I have felt very supported by PoC – from all over the world – I have met through larps and related events, and I have heavily relied on especially a handful of other WoC for support and encouragement.

**Jonaya:** Yes and no. I have a thriving and amazing community that supports me and I can dialogue with, but there have been a few noticeably bad actors who do their level best to close the door behind them by appealing to a “status quo”. There are certain PoC who have done real damage by perpetuating stereotypes and causing lateral violence. Even so, I think I have become a better person by learning from and dialoguing with many people of color, especially from outside of the U.S.

**PoC are in a clear minority when it comes to larp and all four of us are in agreement that larping is a very white hobby. But why?**

**Jonaya:** This is something we need to look at systemically. I don’t believe any one ethnicity is intrinsically disposed to a hobby, but that their

lives *allow* them to do it. From a U.S. standpoint white people have a systemic upper hand and have more leisure time, unless they are lower class. It’s quite hard to think of larping when you do not have your fundamental everyday needs met. In the international larp scene as well, many of the participants are middle class and have large degrees of mobility and disposable income. If you don’t have to worry about healthcare and vacation days, then you can sign up for every game. There’s also the point that if you don’t see anyone that looks like you who larps, you may believe you don’t belong there. This happens frequently.

**Liselle:** We have to remember that not only is larp a white hobby. For example, Denmark is a pretty ethnically homogenous country. Even so, there should be more POC larping, but I fear that the experience of being one of the few larpers of color may have scared many off over the years.

**Aina:** I see the same in Norway, it’s a white hobby. The way larp is portrayed in the media, showing white people doing white nerdy things. The lack of representation will lessen any interest for the few non-white people who are interested in trying, because if you already are a little geeky, chances are you are ostracised in your current communities already. Not everyone is up for finding a new community where you will once more be the odd one out. Then when no PoC joins, including them for representation is harder, and thus the spiral continues.

**Anna:** From a Swedish point of view, this is an expensive hobby and you need to know someone that can point you to larps and help you with the first steps, from equipment and transport to friends. The lack of PoC is another thing that I think

scares away people. It is not easy to go into a hobby where you are not represented and you have to worry about racism. I think it’s a serious issue when we take larp as an example of an inclusive hobby. In Sweden, the larp scene is so good at welcoming women and queer people but white larpers tend to stop there and think that this is good enough. “Well, if more PoC would like to larp, they can just join us.” They completely forget about the previously mentioned barriers for PoC when it comes to larp.

**Jonaya:** Yes, I think the biggest barriers for getting more PoC into larp are time, money, and relevance. **Aina:** And the lack of visibility and representation.

**Liselle:** This is an important thing. Because if the first thing potential newcomers encounter when they look at the larp scene is a wall of dismissiveness along the lines of “larp is for everyone, we do not see color, learn to separate fantasy and reality,” that is not reassuring or actually inclusive. We need to trust that our concerns will, at the very least, be taken seriously or listened to, rather than mocked, belittled and brushed off.

**Without getting into details, we have had bad experiences when it comes to being a WoC in the larp community. How has that affected us?**

**Liselle:** I spent too many years afraid of rocking the boat before I decided it was vital I raise my voice and object when I encountered issues. When I met other PoC in the international scene, it gave me confidence. The realization that me not speaking up on certain issues might mean no one would was also a deciding factor.

**Anna:** I started to speak up when I met another WoC and realized that she have had the same experience. That it was a structure and not just me. From then I just continued to “make a mess” and being the one that made trouble. I wanted it to be better for PoC that came after me. But dear god, it can be so exhausting.

**Aina:** Yes, it can often make me tired, and feel like I am “that person” who always has to bring up “that thing.” On good days it makes me proud that I am and

Aina Skjønselfjell at a larp organized as part of a friend's wedding. Photo: Nadina Dobrowolska and Maciek Nitka





Liselle Awwal at a scene in *The Last Song*,  
by Avalon Larp Studio & Yxengard.  
Photo: Henrik B. Hansen

can be, but mostly it makes me want to give up because I still have to. But I see that times may be changing. Some people are trying more, making more effort. The larp community isn't doomed or hopeless, but it looks like it will take a lot more time than I should like.

**While it has become better, some big mistakes have nonetheless been made by white larpers when it comes to inclusion that still make us want to facepalm.**

**Liselle:** A common mistake is to make assumptions about what PoC want or need without actually consulting us. I realize inclusion can be difficult to navigate, but it is frequently not enough to glance at the opinion of a single PoC on social media and then decide that this

must be the universal truth. What is needed or wanted for a larp in Denmark may be entirely different from what PoC larpers in the U.S. require.

**Jonaya:** Totally agreeing on not listening to their local populations! As much as many of us are connected, we are different. I don't know anything about being Ghanaian and Danish, so I don't know what that community needs exactly. Listen to what the racialized people in your community need first.

**Anna:** The idea that all PoC are one big happy family is so weird, since we all have different backgrounds and experiences. I honestly get pissed off when it's assumed that we need to think the same way and give one answer, for



**Anna:** I feel that white people can be offended very quickly when they are pointed towards racist things, or even problematic people that are using racial slurs. That is one thing I would like to improve. And not having to argue why actual Nazis should not be allowed at larps...

**Jonaya:** And we need to rethink how the community uses "cancel culture" and "woke". Oftentimes organizers may fear being canceled or complain about wokeness if a PoC player comes to them with an issue. Instead of listening, they use these phrases exactly like far right politicians, and that stops the growth of larp. I wouldn't feel comfortable at a larp where an organizer reacts to feedback that way.

**One question that we have gotten during the years is: "Why do we keep on larping if things are so horrible." There are some reasons, apart from the fact that we love larp.**

**Liselle:** To discover and bond with other WoC in recent years has been wonderful. It's a special feeling

Anna Erlandsson at the larp *Vedergällningen*.  
Photo: Anna Erlandsson

inclusion to be allowed to happen.

**Aina:** Non-PoC larpers need to listen more when you are being told something is problematic. Do not dismiss it because you wouldn't do that. Chances are, you might. Speak up if you see others do problematic things. Stand with us. Don't make us seem like the only "those people" who always and only have to talk about "those things." Be one of "those people" with us. If everyone is "those people", none of us are.

**Liselle:** And make sure to elevate PoC voices. Listen attentively if attention is called to something being an issue, even if it is one you – or even your personal PoC friends – have not experienced to be an issue.



Aina Skjønsgjell at the larp *Avalon*.  
Photo: Nadina Dobrowolska

to experience solidarity when we are meeting. Just to support each other in chats has been novel and delightful. There has been an uptick in allied voices of support trying to amplify my own to ensure it is heard on issues that affect me, for which I am thankful.

**Jonaya:** Another one of my favorite experiences is being a visible PoC in order to help other visible people of color. I played the Headmistress for the first run of *Forbidden History*, and had an amazing scene in which I was able to acknowledge oppression and power, and open a door for a player who played a student.

**Aina:** I love that I have met other WoC that I would not have met elsewhere. It has been really good, it is like we have our own little community within a community. To see how similar and yet different our experiences are, comparing "war stories," and to really know that we are not an entity;

usually most of these women have vastly different opinions on everything and I love us for it.

**Anna:** I have loved to find my voice in the community and be part of the change I've seen happen during these years. It goes slowly but it happens, and that gives me hope. Not to mention that I have met so many wonderful WoC that have become dear friends. They are people that I can reach out to and share experiences with as a WoC and that has been invaluable for me.

**We will be larping for at least 20 years more and sometimes, we will be very loud when it comes to inclusion. For all non-PoC, here is some advice from us to you on how to get more PoC into larp.**

**Liselle:** Invite PoC larpers into your projects, and not solely as inclusivity consultants but fully fledged

collaborators. This is so important. Do not expect us to work for free.

**Jonaya:** Continue to support PoC in making their own stories and uplifting them, especially in their own communities. There are many racialized individuals living in Nordic countries who need their voices amplified in the ways that only they know how to explain. I would love to play in the worlds they create.

**Anna:** Support PoC in your community and accept that we have different opinions. Yes, it will get complicated but it is the road forward. Accept that larp is not so inclusive as of now, and that it is not enough to just say that "everybody is welcome." Collaborate with organizations and schools to open up the door to larp for young PoC.

**Aina:** In short: Listen to us. □



# GLAMOUR

Text: Erik Winther Paisley

## Looking cool, feeling cool.

No one wants to hear about your character. If you want to indulge the urge, you've at least got to buy your poor listener a drink. One Knudepunkt in Denmark had a *Tell Me About Your Character* stand, like somewhere between a kissing booth and a confessional. It's a running joke because it's the hallmark of when the player, whether for lack of experience or self-awareness, doesn't know when to shut up.

We've all heard or starred in the stories about newcomers' extravagantly overpowered characters. In the original 2021 presentation that acts as the basis for this article, I gave the example of a half-demon paladin. It was a fig leaf meant to cover my shame.

Let me tell you about the character I really had:

*Kaltzakai. He started out as a plains elf in a costume based on something I had seen in Diablo II. In time he was able to become*

*a druid apprentice, then through late-night rituals in the woods, a druid. Then he acquired a lynx as his totem, and with it claws and fur-tipped elf ears. His ambition led to a schism in the druid order between the animal totems and the plant totem, which led to his fall and expulsion. He was then cursed, made a pact with a demon, and founded a coven of witches. He ended play as a part vampire, part plains elf, wolverine-totem witch.*

He was, in other words, awesome and by extension so was I. I had so many spells and powers. I got to cackle and be evil, ham it up, do rituals that changed the game, glue endless new latex prosthetics onto my poor ears. It was tremendous. I mattered. My story was unique. Kaltzakai did not have pimples and he was not a 9th grader.

You don't need to be this committed to teenage nerdiness to let yourself enjoy your moment in the sun, but here is a reason stories about newbies revolve around their overpowered characters. They want to feel something, the same as everybody else.

They want to experience power, to feel unique, indulge themselves, have agency, to matter. This motivation has a massive draw on larpers, new and old, but it's about the only taboo concerning our

motivations in larp that we have left. Which is silly, because it is why every non-larper thinks we do what we do.

### "THAT PLEASURABLE PANG OF DESIRE"

This is because glamour isn't just a feeling. It's a sensation, like humor or horror.

Virginia Postrel is one of the few scholars currently working on the topic of glamour. In her book *The Power of Glamour: Longing and the Art of Visual Persuasion* defines it from the eye of the beholder. To Postrel, glamour isn't a red-carpet look – glamour is how you feel when you see the star wearing it: "Glamour offers a lucid glimpse of desire fulfilled - if only life could be like that, if only we could be there, if only we could be like them."

That sense of yearning, which both invites you to project yourself into the scene and reminds you of the distance between you, is a powerful driver behind much of fan culture. The distance can almost be painful, and you want to reach out.

This sentiment will be familiar to many who discover larp – they didn't know they had been looking, but once they did, the desire took shape and gave us an outlet. Postrel

specifically mentions *Star Trek* as a powerful source of glamour, with its hope, beauty, utopianism, and adventure.

The aspect of illusion in glamour is the perfection, the airbrush, the flawlessness, the transcendent quality that lifts it out of the ordinary. It's something we can only truly imagine, but which we can aspire to. Grace hides the artifice and effort, making it even more impermeable to scrutiny.

Glamorous worlds have such broad appeal, especially in image-flooded societies, but particularly for anyone whose ideals or aspirations feel somewhat out of touch. The nerds, the loners, the queer kids, the eccentrics. We all had tangible reason to become daydreamers and long for something glamorous, and so the allure of utopian or even pleasingly aesthetic dystopian visions had a real tug on us. Glamorous worlds always do – especially when they are slightly out of touch.

Glamour makes you want to hold onto something before it slips away, because it "gives form to an otherwise formless longing or desire," as she puts it. It's what drives cutting out pictures from a magazine, putting posters of your idols up, collecting autographs and reading fanfiction. When the intensity of the glamour-yearning is too strong, we resolve it somehow.

## LARPING GLAMOUR

Participatory glamour starts when we close the gap between the yearning and the focus of glamour. It's a step up from the purely ideational: at this point we're testing, trying, prodding to see how bold we are and what we feel like we can pull off. The immediate yield is personal glamour: the enjoyment of embodying something you admire or yearn for, but with an implied audience – even if you are the only member of that audience. (This is similar to **Jonaya Kemper's** discussion of steering for a particular self-image in her article *Wyrding the Self*, published in 2020.)

Think of the way people listen to music while on a walk and picture themselves as the star of a movie montage. You might be posing in front of the mirror; you might be striding purposefully down a corridor with no-one in sight; pouring your heart and soul into a diary. Even if no one saw you, *you know* you were part of what created that beautiful, ephemeral event.

The power of larp culture is that those private moments of enjoyment can be inscribed in a meaningful, shared, context that can tell you - *it's real. You pulled it off.* It's the frisson of energy that goes through a crowd at the end of a game, as people circulate to congratulate each other, get introduced off-game, and when they start to recognize the others' contributions. It's the larp photo that captures how you felt inside, the one that seems to make what you had in your minds *eye visible for the world*. There's a sense of wonder and fulfillment: Is that really me? *Yes, it is.*

Our memories, war stories and memorabilia turn what we yearned for in private into social facts – and there are so few moments where we genuinely get to experience that, in life or in larp.

## FRAGILITY

It is easy to forget that the outward portrayal doesn't directly reflect the player's personal sense of glamour – it's illusory, after all. We do it after, but because we don't plan glamour nearly as well as we do the other sensations we steer for, the person trying to portray it is often left hanging.

Glamour relies on tricks of perspective and a code of silence about its production that shields it from prying eyes. It, as Postrel puts it, "must deploy a degree of mystery, illusion, and grace that vanishes once it shifts from the glamorous to the familiar."

To play for glamour requires the player to put themselves forward, lay their cards on the table; requiring them to be evaluated and to some extent to be judged, aesthetically. Players are never more vulnerable in their personal glamour than when they are portraying it for others. They will always be aware of the effort that went in, know what hot glue is holding which part of the costume together.

The longer the speech you improvise at a larp, the greater your risk of faltering. It can stay perfect for much longer in the mind's eye. It will be more protected in a static image than on video. The video will be safer than live coverage, and both will be less risky than an in-person performance. Glamour is powerful but fragile.

We all remember the fate that befell the *Star Wars* kid: A teen boy in slacks and a stripey shirt pretending to be Darth Maul in a way that is both earnest and inept, particularly at a time where videoing yourself was decidedly uncool.

Yet we're caught here. We feel the tug of glamour. We know it's dangerous, that it might fail, but we can't close the gap – we often can't even larp – unless we try to reach out and cross the chasm of yearning, through the valley of cringe. You can



glamorize your internal perspective and do poses in the privacy of your home, but it isn't the same as trying some out *in real life*.

NO, NOT LIKE THAT

Glamour-seeking creeps into the game through elements we bring in, like costume and styling, and glamorous moments are the stuff of war stories and powerful personal experiences. It generally sits at odds with the higher-brow narrative about what larp stands for.

I understand that we're tired of being dragged in the press, being laughed at, or looked at funny if we ever explain the event we're attending over the summer. We've worked hard for respectability. We talk about larp in very different ways depending on whether we are trying to defend it or promote it. That isn't weird in itself, but one way shies away from larp's larpness and the other pulls its punches.

The first is to approach larp based on our yearnings, the way you might with other media – plenty of which invite you to imagine yourself as part of the setting or offer you the chance to experience *this feeling*. How much sense the larp makes, what recognition it has, then depends on what you're using the larp to experience. It's never a hard sell. *I went to the science fiction game to feel what it would be like to be on a spaceship*. This has an immediate appeal and doesn't rest on any strong understanding of the medium, but it rather rudely yanks the curtain away from alibi.

Denuded of their alibis a lot of our games look intense. At least in the Nordics, intensity can easily veer into cringe. Overt displays of emotion tend to be seen as loss of control (unless it's about sports), which is inherently cringe in the phlegmatic Nordic region, as is being overly enthusiastic in a way that shows detachment from the mainstream or becomes domineering.

This becomes more acute when we approach the larps that aren't fun. With darker subject matter, everything that made larp sound so appealing – the immediacy, immersion, embodiment – starts to sound bizarre, and they drift back into thinking we are larping to attend to some psychological need that can't be fulfilled through a more conventional medium, like therapy or politics.

Knowing these reactions, it's natural to demur from the idea that we're in it for the fun of it. For any larp, we can point to a dozen movies or books dealing with whichever tragedy or calamity we've been playing that weekend. And either way, it seems too frivolous to describe what we do as being for fun. And *larp* isn't just a game; it is for serious grown-ups who want to have a deeply meaningful experience. This is about *catharsis*, not cosplay.

So we end up abandoning or sublimating our sense of yearning because we don't want to seem weird for enjoying intense materials or cringe for enjoying normal materials too intensely. The intensity we feel needs to have a worthy object that can protect us from the cringe, so we end up pivoting from the low-brow and first-order appeal of larp – the esthetic, the vibe, the world, the tangibility, the enjoyment of being there, the subject matter – to its high-brow, second-order appeals:

Intellectual appreciation that emerges after-the-fact, as you appreciate a storyline that resolved well, a character that went through an interesting transformation, reflection on the theme of the game.

I don't think this is tenable or helpful. Turning away from immediacy means leaving larp behind. It might be difficult to explain why we get a visceral kick out of pretending to suffer, but it was difficult to organize, too, and that didn't stop us. And either way, no one gives much credence to our protestations anyway: experience-seeking, if not pleasure-seeking, is baked into the medium.

If larp weren't about wish-fulfillment, we wouldn't have any need to steer the game. If we weren't there for our enjoyment – whether that's in the moment or looking back – we wouldn't need to attend the games, let alone write them. We could simply find another furnace for our savings. That would be a damned shame.



★STANISLAV BLOKHIN / REVOLUTIONARY

Quote  
*I was worshiped as a god.*

The Feeling  
Awe, power, beauty, fame, admiration: It captures the exact moment I experienced the most glorious and fulfilling moment of the larp.

The Photo  
A cult whose worshippers consciously sin together to save their eternal souls have turned their adoration to Stanislav's character.

Context  
*Redemption* (2021).  
Photo: Kai Simon Fredriksen

Bio  
Stanislav Blokhin is based in Sweden and has been larping just under ten years, mainly in the Nordics and Poland. He leans toward romance and comedy.



★INGE-METTE PETERSEN / KING DUNCAN

Quote  
*Nordic, challenging, provoking and very probably sexy.*

The Feeling  
It makes me look strong, confident and very sexy. The way I touch my tie is my favorite detail.

The Photo  
A private costume study of a character created during lock-down for a yet-to-be-played larp: Rubym Tuesday, who Inge-Mette will play as a cross-dressing female character.

Context  
*The Wild Hunt: 3AM Forever* (2022). Photo: Inge-Mette Petersen.

Bio  
Inge-Mette Petersen lives in Denmark and has been larping for more than six years, including in Spain, Italy and Sweden.





## \*OLIVER ELM / "CHRISSIE VAUGHN"

### Quote

*It put who I knew I could be in my heart into an image.*

### The Feeling

When I saw this picture, I was floored. I looked cool, mysterious, hot, and most importantly, like a man.

### The Photo

The journey of realising that I am a transgender man and then becoming myself was a long one. This larp where I got to portray the most masculine of things, a cowboy, was the first time it fully and truly sank home. I am a man.

### Context

*Conscience* (4<sup>th</sup> run, 2019)

A Nordic style Western larp inspired by *Westworld*.

Photo: Kai Simon Fredriksen

### Bio

Oliver is based in Sweden and has been larping for less than five years. He prefers Nordic larps, with themes like romance, intrigue and surrealism.

## \*EVA WEI / VASANTASENA

### Quote

*The weight of all those prophecies on her shoulders.*

### The Feeling

Vulnerability, determination, and a sense of direction – and pride at the costume and styling.

### The Photo

An unconventional vampire picture in terms of color and lighting, but still very *vampiresque*. It really captures the essence of the character, a famous Malkavian, who I was both humbled and a little bit intimidated to portray.

## \*NIKLAS CREMER / NIKOLAY RASKAT

### Quote

*We're guests in the zone, the mutants are the inhabitants.*

### The Feeling

Even under the mask, you can get a glimpse of the pressure of a squad leader engaging in a potentially deadly situation.

### The Photo

The exact moment Niklas stood up as a soldier in a derelict radiation zone to stop his crew from escalating the situation, by showing a mutant his empty hand to try and calm things down. It is a chance to show more than just the gear in post-apocalyptic larps.

### Context

*BunkerSprings 10* (2021),

Photo: Viographie

### Bio

Niklas Cremer is based in Germany and has been larping for 10 years. He prefers games that are dirty, "kind of gruesome" and highly immersive.

### Context

*Convention of Thorns* (2016).

Photo: John-Paul Bichard

### Bio

Eva Wei is based in Sweden and has been a larper for more than 10 years. She prefers smaller Nordic-style games with tightly-written social relationships.







★CHARLIE HALDÉN / RUBEN

**Quote**  
*I felt confident, sexy, desired, a sense of belonging and secure all at the same time.*

**The Feeling**  
Playing Ruben is the most glamorous I’ve ever felt in larp. The leathermen’s dungeon was a magical space, a place where I could fully and joyfully be a gay man.

**The Photo**  
It completely captures how I felt inside, which is far from always the case with larp photos. The masculine contours of my jawline and hair, look in Ruben’s eyes and the tilt of his face. The leather caps – the details that show the sexual charge of the moment.

**Context**  
*Just a Little Lovin’*(2019)  
A Nordic larp honoring LGBT history in the 1980s.  
Photo: Oliver Facey

**Bio**  
Charlie Haldén is based in Sweden and has been larping for the better part of a decade. His larp interests include queerness, feminism, history.



★ARVID BJÖRKLUND / UNNAMED SOLDIER

**Quote**  
*The gaze! The ruggedness!*

**The Feeling**  
It feels genuine and historic in a way and I love how rugged I look.

**The Photo**  
This is taken after the larp, meaning the weariness showing in the picture is very much real. I don’t necessarily feel connected to the character, but to the group I played in. We all felt really badass and working as a team in matching costumes does things to you.

**Context**  
*College of Wizardry 18* (2018),  
Photo: Kamil Wedzicha

**Bio**  
Arvid Björklund is based in Norway and has been larping for more than 10 years, mainly in Sweden. To him, the visual part of a larp or a character is equally as important as the design.



## ★ANDREAS ESSO JENSEN / HEINRICH GHOL

### Quote

*I felt great, I succeeded in my goals, and I had an epic death.*

### The Feeling

Powerful, impressive, competent, mysterious.

### The Photo

The picture captures the moment where my character, a vampire spy, held all the cards and chose to help others to his gain. My favorite detail is my little smile, how you can see the satisfaction on his face.

### Context

*Tales of the night* (2016): Nordic-style Vampire campaign  
Photo: René Ellekjær Madsen

### Bio

Anders Esso Jensen has been larping for more than ten years from his base in Denmark. He gravitates to political, intrigue and relationship-based games.



## ★MARIA ØSTERBY ELLEBY / SERAFINA

### Quote

*This is a person who could take on nations.*

### The Feeling

I often feel beautiful or refined or elegant at larps - but with this character, in this photo, I also feel badass.

### The Photo

A self-taught librarian who got thrown in with a bunch of adventurers, first a battlemage-fire priestess and the guardian of a magical library. I love this character. She is very close to me in personality, but with less filter and maybe something of a magical light-heartedness and sense of adventure.

### Context

*Conquest of Mythodea* (2017)  
The world's largest larp, "think running around in *Skyrim*."  
Photo: Marco Winter.

### Bio

Maria Østerby Elleby is based in Denmark and has been larping for more than ten years at home, in the Nordics, Germany and Poland.



## ★MO HALKAR / "DUKE" MALCOLM

### Quote

*The pose, hands on hips: Duke Malcolm's swagger, very much not me.*

### The Feeling

This was my first larp after the pandemic, and I was pretty ill and had been for a long time. This photo seems full of energy and positivity, so to see 'myself' looking like that at such a time is quite uplifting for me.

### The Photo

My character is called Malcolm, and his persona within the medieval fantasy (as shown here) is called Duke Malcolm. This was a larp about a group of modern-day people who themselves are partly living in a shared pretended medieval fantasy world.

### Context

*The Castle* (2022).  
Photo: Míša Portyčová.

### Bio

Mo Halkar is based in the U.K. and has been larping there and around Europe for more than ten years. He is interested in larps that explore the human condition.

## ★JAAGUP IRVE / SARD NAR

### Quote

*For vanity and the likely rarity of Estonian larp photos.*

### The Feeling

I look cool and the photo reflects the changes in the character, from a conservative general to something rather more modern.

### The Photo

I had made some unpopular pragmatic choices during the revolution, now given a golden parachute to suppress a would-be revolution. I like the light and how the edge of the mirror helps in guiding the eye.

### Context

*Elesgal: Constitution* (2021)  
A game of intrigue mixing loyalties, betrayal and realpolitik.  
Photo: Aapo Reitsak

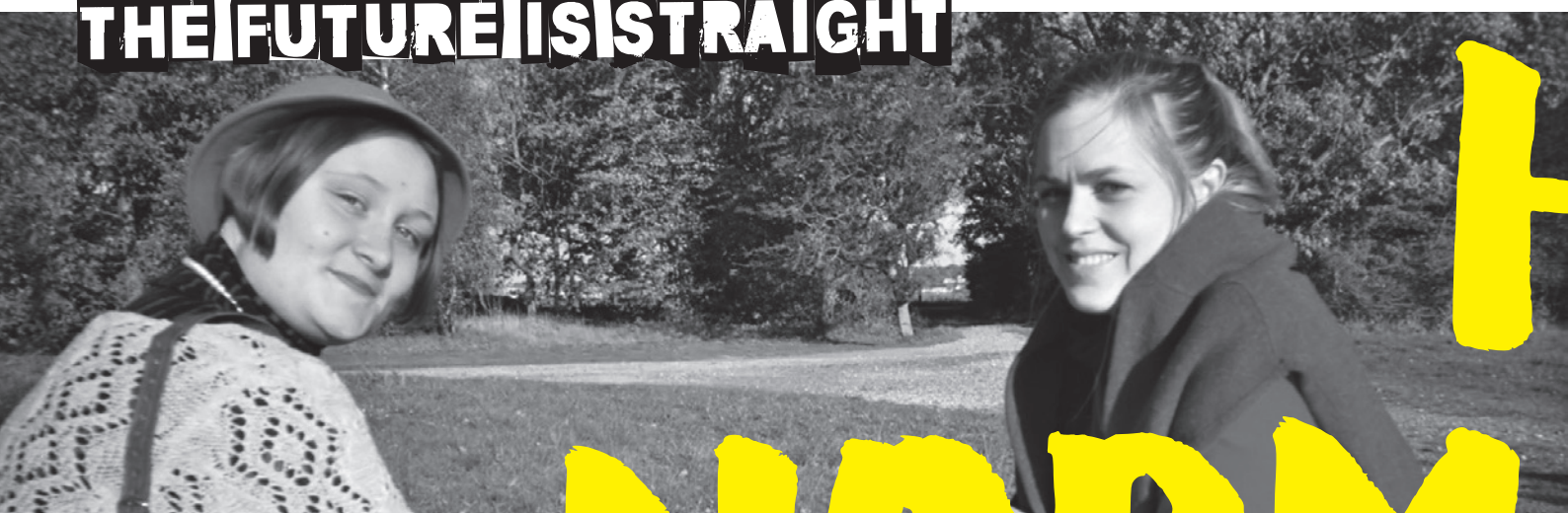
### Bio

Jaagup Irve is based in Estonia, where he has been larping for more than 10 years. He currently prefers anything but pure confusing art. □





# HETERO-NORMATIVITY IN PICTURES



Top: mother is visiting her daughter at the center.

Middle: The rehabbers are taking the final midterm exam that tests how well they have grasped the center's normative values.

Bottom: Spin the bottle is always a classic.

**Text:** Juhana Pettersson  
**Photos:** The players of *The Future Is Straight*

**Blue is for boys and red is for girls!**

There are only two genders. Everybody is firmly heterosexual. The purpose of sex is procreation inside the family unit. Everyone has their purpose and must stick to it for society to remain healthy.

These are the basic tenets of the dystopian sci fi culture depicted in the larp *The Future is Straight*. The larp is set at a center where deviant youth attempt to learn to be normal, mirroring real life conversion therapy. Although the larp is dark, it's not

without glimmers of hope and humanity. For many of the characters sent to the center, it was their first time in a queer community, even if a thoroughly repressed one.

Visually the larp was quite striking, with the heteronormative setup emphasized by having boys in blue, girls in red and staff in brown. The larp was documented in part by providing players with a Polaroid camera. You see some of the shots here.



# THE FUTURE IS STRAIGHT



Youth at the center, color coded according to the gender society assigned to them.

## THE FUTURE IS STRAIGHT

Dates: 23. 10. 2021 - 27. 10. 2021  
& 27. 10. 2021 - 31. 10. 2021

Website: [straightfuturelarp.com](http://straightfuturelarp.com)

Main organizers: Karete Jacobsen Meland, Tor Kjetil Edland & Anna Emilie Groth

Concept and development: Cleo Kai Hatting

Photography: Emma Greve

Website and graphic design: Jeppe Kjøller



At night, the youth had opportunities to have fun if they managed to evade the watchful eyes of the staff.



Midterm evaluations happen during the larp but the lives of the characters goes on as before after the larp has ended.



# THE FUTURE IS STRAIGHT

Text: Juhana Pettersson

**Despite a provocative title and controversial subject the organizers of The Future is Straight have yet to receive any weird emails!**

The main organizers behind *The Future Is Straight* are **Karete Jacobsen Meland**, **Tor Kjetil Edland** and **Anna Emilie Groth**. It follows in the tradition of Nordic larps about gender and sexuality. Others in the same vein have been *Just a Little Lovin'* and *Mad About the Boy*. We asked Anna Emilie Groth about her personal perspective on the larp.

**What's your background as a larp designer?**

I have a professional background as a dramaturg, and have designed many blackbox larps in the past. I've also had the opportunity to rerun a bunch of other talented designers' Nordic larps, which was

a great way to acquire the know-how to make this larp, which is the first time I designed a Nordic larp together with Tor Kjetil Edland and Karete Jacobsen Meland.

**Do you have a personal or political context for why you decided to work on The Future is Straight?**

I'm part of the queer community and have worked with youth culture for the most of my career, so in that way the subject of this larp is very close to my heart. Then I think all three of us main organizers really just got super shocked about gay conversion therapy still being legal and practiced in the Nordic countries. We had to dive into the subject!

**Do you have particular larp experiences that you've had that informed your work and design?**

I have been heavily involved in rerunning *Just a Little Lovin'*, and even convinced one of its designers, Tor Kjetil Edland, to join this project, so that larp is definitely a source of inspiration. Both in terms of designing queer characters and for elements such as the blackbox. Then there are many more abstract blackbox scenarios, like those designed by **Nina Essendrop**. They have inspired us as we built the fiction into a more abstract and symbolic direction.

**Considering the title of the larp, were you ever worried about misunderstandings, possibly with people from outside the larp scene?**

Well, yes! The title is a pun on the known expressions "The future is female," "The future is queer," or similar. They're progressive statements about the future being more inclusive, so we hoped that people, even from outside the larp scene, would get the irony. But we had an interesting time with the title especially when we were writing funding applications. So far we haven't had any weird emails with either people wanting to join our cause or being offended by the title!

**What do you think about the way players interacted with the larp?**

I loved that they all committed to the mindset and feel of being a teenager, where everything is felt more intensely, and even a week feels like a long time. That combined with their many different interpretations of the diversity of queer characters, and that they really embraced both the dark humor and campiness in the larp was amazing to experience.

**Is the future going to be straight?**

With one larp at the time we will get there! Next time will be the summer of 2024 in Norway.

# DESIGNING A DYSTOPIA OF STRAIGHTNESS



The main organizers Anna Emilie Groth (top), Karete Jacobsen Meland (left) and Tor Kjetil Edland (bottom right) with Klara Rotvig who was responsible for player care.



# EVERYBODY'S MOM AND DAD

**Text:** Tor Kjetil Edland, Karete Jacobsen Meland and Anna Emilie Groth

This article is written by the main designers of *The Future Is Straight*, with input from Jaakko Stenros, Trine Lise Lindahl, Kaya Toft Thejls and Martin Nielsen, who designed and played the parents at the larp.

## Designing moms and dads for everybody!

“Everybody’s mom and dad” were a set of characters played by two participants in the larp *The Future is Straight*. They were both a set of an extensive collection of individual moms and dads, as well as the archetype of the mom and dad in the society portrayed.

*The Future is Straight* is a Nordic larp run for the first time in October 2021 outside Ebeltoft, Denmark. The participants explore life in a gay conversion camp for youth and young adults. The “rehabbers,” as they are called in the fiction, go through therapy, educational lessons, and possibly tiptoe into a queer community for the first time in their lives. The larp is set in a dystopian retro setting in a extreme heteronormative society where queerness is oppressed based on a worldview grounded in perceptions of science and “nature itself.”

In addition to the rehabber characters the larp has ten instructed players: Eight “guides,” who teach the oppressive curriculum and facilitate “therapy” circles, and two playing everybody’s mother and father which is the design element this article focuses on. Instead of having 64 individual parent characters, we chose to have two people playing everyone’s mom and dad. The parents visit the center during an upcoming midterm evaluation and play out scenes with their children in parent-teacher conferences.

### 32 SCENES

Planning individual scenes with 32 players can of course be a daunting task when the larp itself is around 33 hours of playtime. To solve the matter practically, the parent players decided to create a sign-up list where all players could signal whether they wanted to opt-in or opt-out of a conference scene with the parents and a guide, or if they were indifferent to it. The list also included a comment section, where players could specify if they had any



Jaakko Stenros playing everyone’s father.  
Photo: a Polaroid taken by players during the larp



# THE FUTURE IS STRAIGHT

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE CONFERENCE SCENES

specific wishes for scenes that would work well with their character's story arc. After going through the sign-up list, the parents made a timetable where all players could see when their allotted slot would be.

When the slot approached, one of the larps' on-site helpers would find them somewhere on the location, telling them that they had received a phone call from their parents, and the parents would meet up with the guide who had the rehabber in their therapy group.

Having the phone call both emphasized that the rehabber players should decide what they wanted from the scene, and signal this to the parent players. But the direction the scene would take wasn't unilateral, as the parents could have their own agenda for the scene. Sometimes the guides and parents were ganging up on the kids, in other cases guides would protect the rehabbers from the parents.

Although nearly all players wanted parent scenes, the parent players said that they didn't feel like they were playing the same scene over and over again.

"I hadn't expected how much the parents represented society. This made it even more painful to not only manifest the parents' relationships to the rehabbers, but also why the center "had" to be there for the rehabbers to have a life," parent player **Kaya T. Thejls** commented.

"Everyone else went to a larps; we went to Fastaval, playing many of the same things in different ways. We got to play with everyone at the larps," another parent player, **Jaakko Stenros**, said.

There were some exceptions to the parent-teacher scene structure. The parents were also

The conference scenes with the parents, the guide and the rehabber followed a three-part structure:

- 1. The Phone call scene:** The Scene starts with a limited time phone call between the rehabber and the parents with the rehabber sitting outside the principal's office using a prop phone. This phone call has happened "in the past," for example a few days previously. The scene ends with the phone call ending and the student saying: "I'm really happy they did not ask me about X" or "Fuck, they asked me about X." On the meta level, they're giving input as to the focus of the scene to come.
- 2. The conference session:** The rehabber enters the office, where a guide and the parents are present. The actual scene runs for 5-10 minutes. The scene ends when the parents look at their watches, the guide thanks the parents for coming or the rehabber storms out.
- 3. After talk:** After the scene the parents and the rehabber walk off together and discuss how to play on the scene they just played.

present in blackbox scenes, walking outside as parents visiting the center; cheering on their kids during the orienteering run, observing lectures and therapy groups, and witnessing the rehabber evaluation and mid-term ceremony. There were also a few

conference scenes without parents, if that particular rehabber didn't have a parent who could visit. Instead, they had parole officers and social workers, as well as single parents and siblings.



The parents on a stroll near the center.  
Photo: Organizers of The Future Is Straight

## THE GRADUATION SCENE

The larps ended with a mid-term graduation scene with all the students and all the parents. We wanted to end the larps with a scene where the players had some freedom to decide where their rehabber's story is heading. The design of the graduation scene had all the elements that we would normally avoid: Everybody is present for everyone's end monologue, and has to listen to it. It had choreographed elements, where people were supposed to walk in a certain way. It trapped all the characters in the same scene with limited space to act out scenes - or even move around, as we placed them on chairs. It had an ending monologue from the director of the center.

Nevertheless, we think that the scene works well framing the theme of the larps, closing it with glimpses of every character's likely future. At the scene all the parents were present as well, and for the players playing them, it was a tour de force through 32 parent characters in under 20 minutes. The parent players switched characters every time a new rehabber character came into the spotlight.

"I felt like a rockstar being able to pull that off," parent player **Trine Lise Lindahl** commented.

This particular scene really highlights one of the interesting aspects of the parent characters, which is how the players managed to both play an archetypal version of a dad and mom at the larps, but at the same time were present as every specific character's parents. The individual parent characters were all marked by being part of a heteronormative and oppressive society. But how this manifested varied between the individual characters as interpreted by the parent players. Some parents could themselves harbor doubts about their own sexual identities. Others could be in deep denial, refusing to believe that their child

is gay. Still others could project their own relationship issues on their child.

## AM I A BAD MOTHER?

"The theme of 'Am I a bad mother?' went through all of the mother characters I played," Lindahl said.

"I was playing from pain. My father characters were saying things that have been said to me or to people I know," Stenros commented.

The aim we had for these particular characters was that when they moved around in the larps the rehabber players would feel like the presence of both their own parents and everybody else's. The people portraying the parents had different approaches on how to make this work, but everyone had to relate to the issue of this duality of both being a specific parent and a typical parent.

"Playing the patriarch with a capital P was super interesting for me. What is it like to be the dad to everyone? Both the archetypal dad, and the very specific dads, to all of these characters," Stenros said.

"One of the players was so surprised when they realized we weren't just playing the archetypal parents, but that we were playing his parents and everyone's parents, and not just a parent," Lindahl commented.



Parents getting ready to meet their children.  
Photo: Organizers of The Future Is Straight

## IN OTHER LARPS

We wanted to provide a detailed outline of this specific part of the design for *The Future Is Straight* for both documentation purposes and for any inspiration this example might provide for other larps designers. Mother and father are clearly archetypal character types that could be relevant to play out in similar ways in other settings as well.

Other settings could also have other more relevant archetypes - someone could play everybody's boss or everybody's ex-husband or ex-wife for instance. Or maybe this will inspire something completely different, the same way as we used design ideas from other larps to come up with this one. □





# LARP AGAINST FASCISM

Text: Luiz Prado and Leandro Godoy

## Antifascist larpmaking praxis in Brazil.

In Brazil at the end of the 2010s, fascists are feeling comfortable, whether in rhetoric or in their heinous practices. It's all legitimized by the Federal Government's propaganda, driven by hate and the fake news machine.

The result is a society ruled by hatred, indifference, and derision. Artistic manifestations are persecuted, especially those with content related to minorities and affirmative or pro-democracy actions and which declare their opposition to the fascist regime. Producing culture became an even greater challenge than before, with systematic cuts in funds, dissolution

of the Ministry of Culture and the establishment of a climate of self-censorship almost comparable to the fateful years of the Military Dictatorship (1964 to 1985).

### LARP IN THESE TIMES

*Tempos de Chumbo (Times of Lead)*, 1999, is the first larp organized by Confraria das Ideias, which is one of the most important larp groups in Brazil. Despite being about the time of the Military Dictatorship, it was created in a context where the organization can create freely, without

Demanda Iscariotes, the second act of the larp *Supernova Aurora*, a year before being censored.  
Photo: Thomaz Barbeiro





Playing *Quarentena 64*.  
Photo: Thomaz Barbeiro



A point is made in *Quarentena 64*.  
Photo: Thomaz Barbeiro

pressure, with the apparent security of historical distance.

Later, at other times, Nazism and fascism was approached in different ways in other larps, as an allegory to something very bad that happened and stayed in the past, almost like Indiana Jones facing

cartoon villains carrying decorative swastikas. But time has passed and unfortunately things have changed with the recent rise of the far right and the consequences of this on society as a whole.

With the rise of the far right, the larp scene in Brazil has begun to

confront the issue explicitly. Before, it was more in the subtext.

One of the first examples of this recent crop of larps against the fascist wave in Brazil is the larp *Quarentena 64* (*Quarantine 64*), by Confraria das Ideias.

Flirting with the characteristics of escape rooms, the larp took place in the milieu of a totalitarian, nationalist, militaristic and religious government, which came to power and renamed the country.

With slogans taken from the Bible like "Many will be called, but few chosen," the larp took place in a bunker in which citizens were provisionally held due to an unknown threat. To stay there and protect themselves, however, they had to go through a series of challenges and prove themselves worthy of the state's protection and investment in their security.

In addition to the tension caused by the incessant timer, each

character has characteristics that made him or her well-regarded by the government and, therefore, could complicate their relationship with the other characters.

The larp circulated throughout the state of São Paulo and was performed more than 30 times. In each session, the participants recognized in the characters and in the game situations the direct comparisons with the current moment in the country, and at the end there was always a moment of reflection about it. In this way, *Quarentena 64* came as a response to the recently elected fascist government of **Jair Bolsonaro** and a reminder of his sympathies for the Brazilian military dictatorship.

At the beginning of 2020, the fascist presence was consolidated, and the climate of restriction that already encompassed other artistic languages, such as the persecution of the play *O Evangelho segundo Jesus, Rainha do Céu* (*The Gospel According to Jesus, Queen of Heaven*) where a trans artist played the role of Jesus Christ, or the censorship of music festivals that called themselves anti-fascist, or even the censorship of the Queer Museum exhibition, reached the larp scene.

The climate of fear created by supporters of the federal government led cultural agents - responsible for programming the activities of an important Cultural Center in São Paulo - to self-censorship, frightened by the violent repercussions that the society co-opted by fascism was reproducing. The larp *Supernova Aurora*, by Confraria das Ideias, which had already been performed his four acts on other occasions without any kind of problem, received the "recommendation" to take out the second act, named Demanda Iscariotes (Iscariot Demand) or it could not be performed, for fear of the reaction of the local community. The act concerns the search for the remains of Judas Iscariot.

Top: Promo material for the larp *Ustraje*.

Below: Screenscaptures of visuals from the larp *Evangelho 2020*.

## INITIATIVES

When the national secretary of culture **Roberto Alvim** delivered his speech with quotes from Goebbels in January 2020, the signal was given for a more coordinated and consistent movement of productions aimed at combating fascism.

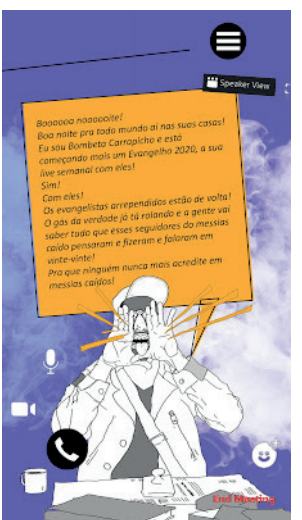
One of the first was *Brigadas Anti-Nazistas* (*Anti-Nazi Brigades*), larp by **Luiz Prado** whose script was originally published in video format and made available in Facebook groups. Blurring boundaries between fiction and reality, game and seriousness, the larp consisted of the meeting of the anti-Nazi brigade of the title to prepare a pamphlet denouncing and resisting a newly arrived Nazi in the neighborhood. Players were encouraged to actually produce the pamphlet, make copies and distribute it around the neighborhood as a warning to the Nazi presence.

With the publication of the

game, a lively debate began on Brazilian social networks about the pertinence of a larp with this content, if it constituted a game or simply propaganda, if politics should interfere with larp and roleplaying games. Some of the larp's supporters not only expressed public support for the initiative, but decided to make their own productions showing that larp can (and should) take sides.

One of these works is *A última balsa, e a última valsa, para Ancapistúria* (*The Last Balsa, and the Last Waltz, for Ancapistúria*) by **Tadeu Rodrigues Iuma**. In it, the same friction between game and reality reappears.

As a strategy of necropolitics, the federal government had a denialist stance that caused many Brazilians to die from the COVID-19 pandemic. As a form of protest and warning, many larps have been designed to address this. The first production that circulated on social media was *Coronatus*, by





**Livia Von Sucro**, a larp for two people in which God calls a billionaire for a conversation, during the pandemic, in which he will decide if he deserves to live or should he be executed and have his fortune distributed to the poor.

Also reflecting on the pandemic and politics, Luiz Prado published *Excelência Overdrive* (*Excellency Overdrive*), experimenting with online larp. In the plot, new world leaders that emerged during the pandemic come together to think about actions to rebuild the world.

Prado also delved into both online larp and political themes with *Queremos Guerra! (We Want war!)* and *Evangelho 2020 (Gospel 2020)*, launched in 2021. The first consists of a meeting of the Brazilian military high command to create a fake war and distract the population's attention from the country's problems. *Evangelho 2020* is a live-streamed podcast in which a presenter with anarchist tendencies interviews repentant supporters of the president, under the influence of a truth gas. To create the characters, the author used research in the area of social sciences that mapped the profile of the president's voters in 2018.

On May 22, 2020, the Federal Superior Court overturned a decree of secrecy and thus allowed the release of a video of a ministerial meeting that took place a month earlier. The exposed practices of the fascist government inspired the creation of the online larp *Invocação Extraordinária Ministerial (Invocation for Extraordinary Ministerial Meeting)*, by professor **Rafael Carneiro Vasquez**, where a mediocre demon called "Capetão" invoked his ministry composed of other equally mediocre demons in search of the best plans to transform life.

Born from the author's discomfort with what happened at the meeting and from the passivity with which people dealt with the fact, the larp ends up being an investigation of this sick, macabre and perverse persona that seems to inhabit these actors who decide our day-to-day life, endorsed by an election ruled by fear and outright lies.

Then it was Luiz Falcão's turn to publish *A Job for Hitler*, a larp in

which a team of publicists living in the Third Reich in 2021 needs to develop a campaign to improve the Führer's image. The game was produced in the context of an anti-fascist jam.

Another initiative Jam 64 Never Again, an initiative by the roleplaying game publisher Coisinha Verde, to face the acts and speeches of exaltation of the Brazilian military dictatorship, celebrated by some as a revolution on March 31.

It is in the context of this Jam that **Dino Machado** published *Segredos de Liquidificador* (*Blender Secrets*) and *A vida dos outros* (*The Life of Others*). The first, an endless and exhausting interrogation for interrogator and prisoner and the second about a subversive group that meets in the midst of the military dictatorship to debate their next steps.

**Tadeu Rodrigues luma**, together with the group Coral Amarelo and Luiz Falcão contributed to the Jam with *Ustraje*, which is about collecting testimonies from torturers, for a possible later trial.

Another contribution to the Jam is the larp *Cabo Pereira e a turma do colégio* (*Soldier Pereira and His School Friends*), by Leandro Godoy. The larp was created to confront those people who believe that at the time of the military dictatorship only the so-called subversives were repressed by the government. The soldier Pereira must interrogate prisoners, and at the time of interrogation he discovers that they are his childhood friends, and that is where the conflict begins.

The larp was performed for the first time at FLO (Festival de larp Online), and was part of the programming of the International Larp Festival of Chaos League in 2022.

### CONSEQUENCES

Within the Brazilian larp and roleplaying scene, not all welcomed these initiatives. Some, fearing that there would be danger to organizers and participants, due to the growing

hatred from supporters of the fascist government, others for trying to maintain an "impartial" posture - which, of course, always ends up penalizing the most vulnerable side, and others still unfortunately agreeing with these atrocious ideas.

Some walked away from the scene, relationships were severed and groups on social media sought to vehemently position themselves to keep spaces safe. Hate speech was denounced and reprimanded. But this discomfort can also be seen as an effective result of the scene's positioning. After all, all the work to create safe and inclusive environments of the last decade

would be put at serious risk by not confronting, by keeping people with thoughts aligned with hatred, prejudice and barbarism hidden in the community.

About 40% of the programming of the FLO festival - Festival de Larp Online (Brazil, 2021) had themes directly related to the fight against fascism, in a clear demonstration of community concern. The games were well received, with participation from new and old players, bringing interesting debate and positive reflection.

Although proportionally the contact of the Brazilian population with the production of larps against

fascism is small, its impact within the gaming community can still reverberate for years. A symptom of an era? A reaction of the artistic class? A coping strategy? Personal healing? Perhaps a little bit of all this and, on the part of those who participate in this movement, in the hope that this action will make a difference in people's lives. □

## MORE INFORMATION

FLO - Festival de Larp Online: [larpflo.blogspot.com](http://larpflo.blogspot.com)

Confraria das Ideias - [confrariadasideias.com.br](http://confrariadasideias.com.br)

Luiz Falcão's article LuizNew Tastes in Brazilian larp published in 2014 in *The Cutting Edge of Nordic Larp*

Most of the larps in this article can be read at:

- ★ Larp Brasil - [larpbrasil.blogspot.com/](http://larpbrasil.blogspot.com/)
- ★ Luiz Prado - [luizprado.wordpress.com/](http://luizprado.wordpress.com/)



Striking scenography in *Quarentena 64*.  
Photo: Thomaz Barbeiro



# BEYOND CRACKING EGGS

Text: Jamie MacDonald

**Larp made  
me trans;  
what next? A  
conversation  
between four  
larpers whose  
eggs cracked a  
long time ago.**

**JM:** Now that we have more people talking about larp, a lot of people say “larp taught me that I could be another gender.” That’s a great conversation that we’ve now had a few times, so what is the next conversation? What’s next after “larp can teach me that I can be different”?

**ES:** I would say that it can teach you *how* to be different. Gender is a thing we do, and having an environment where we can actually learn — I mean, my first *Inside Hamlet* was the first time I ever tried to perform that specific kind of high femininity.

**AN:** I was thinking about *skills*. It can take years to feel comfortable with

the most basic skills of performing the gender role that you want to be reflected as.

**JM:** I’m what, eight years in? And I’m finding that I don’t feel like I’m getting so much more comfortable with the skills as much as getting comfortable with feeling uncomfortable. There are definitely people and situations where I still have no idea how to interact.

**ES:** It gets easier. There are still things that feel weird and fraught— but there are so many things that I’ve also stopped noticing are skills; I don’t realize they’re learned anymore.

**AN:** But there’s also some danger

to larp being talked about in this sense. How do we talk about what it is that we do? Because there’s no way to make that immune from someone saying “well, this is just an act” — reducing it to clothing and skills. We didn’t just put on the dress or the suit, we put on the skills, and they don’t want environments where people can learn these skills and become comfortable with them. They don’t want us to exist. Maybe let’s not get too depressing here, but I think that’s what is radical about larp spaces: they can be a place where you can learn.

**JM:** Most people don’t actually want that liberation.



**ES:** To that I would say they're going to try to kill us regardless, so making ourselves smaller isn't going to stop it. My answer to that is to ignore it, and even to be explicit about this — here is the fraught thing, and we choose to ignore it. But skills are an interesting frame because body language isn't a skill. You're literally restructuring your peripheral nervous system to have different kinds of reflexes, right? You could argue that performance plus time is part of physical transition.

**JM:** Like fluency?

**ES:** Deeper than that, it's physiological.

**JM:** Maybe similar to the way when you start to think in a new language and react in that language — you don't forget your original one, but for a long time they can get mixed up.

**I've never played a larp that is as queer as my life is.**

**SS:** As a player, I find it useful to have access to queer history and other queer experiences. And to play your own oppression, because it can be very liberating to fuck with it. But as the backlash against queer people has been growing, our queer games have become more sanitized; people don't want to play on things they experience in real life. People playing the oppressors are scared of playing the oppressors.

**JM:** If you can't have the oppressors in these games, you also lose out on the possibility for liberation.

**SS:** Exactly, and that's what's been bugging me. One of the things larp can do is let us see the oppression and act against it.

**AN:** We have to workshop people to get them to play mean and nasty!

**JM:** In *The Future is Straight* I played the head of the conversion camp and used this very nuanced, caring kind of normative oppressor — the counselors and I would do these horrible scenes and then meet up in the kitchen to cry. But at the end I didn't feel horrible, I felt intensely grateful to anyone who had done any of that work, who had stood up to this in the past and now. But can trans liberation and larp overlap?

**ES:** I mean, we know larp is a very bad tool for doing politics because it doesn't scale. But learning history in a very deep way is one of the places where it can be useful. Like, *this* is what it meant to come out as trans 15 or 20 years ago. Or the fight between the leather dykes and the conventional pride ecosystem in 1980 and '81. Understanding how we survived previously and how we fought is a direct survival mechanism.

**JM:** But are the kids even interested in history yet?

**ES:** Larp lets us create scripts for talking across generations. We don't really have scripts for talking to our elders because they died, or went stealth.

**JM:** And there's an active campaign to prevent us from interacting with young people.

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**As a trans person, can you actually imagine a version of yourself without thinking about the gendered implications of it?**

**JM:** Sometimes I go into a larp thinking I want to consciously play with a particular part of myself, or to try something out, and to cis people it might not be a characteristic or personality that is obviously gendered, but for me it's *inescapably* gendered.

**ES:** I mean, as a trans person, can you actually imagine a version of yourself without thinking about the gendered implications of it?

**JM:** No, exactly.

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**SS:** One of the reasons I larp is that sometimes when I'm larping, I can forget that I'm trans, and I crave that so much.

**JM:** Do you reflect yourself as cis, or do you just forget that transness is a thing?

**SS:** I don't know. I forget that I am trans. Not that it exists, but the inhabitation of another character can sort of reinscribe a bodily understanding of myself.

**ES:** I remember that specifically from *Just a Little Lovin'*, this physical weirdness of interacting with my own body after the game, like wait, what is this?

**JM:** I'm going to take a different direction. Obviously *Just a Little Lovin'* was the larp that made my omelet more than cracked my egg, and it was jarring to leave that

character body, but not just the body; the way that people behaved around that body. And like, in real life when I walk into a new social situation, especially a non-queer one, I'm always looking for my failure modes and the social and gendered awkwardness have real consequences. But in a larp, people are so ready to paper over your "mistakes." I experience some of the usual anxiety of performing in the larp, but I have a lot less anxiety about just being in a social situation at all. And I wonder if this is the liberatory element; like, I would like to live in a society where I feel like that all the time.

**ES:** To be in a room where you're guaranteed a kind reading.

**AN:** Also something about the fact that everybody has a layer of performance.

**JM:** Yeah, and they *know* it!

**ES:** Everyone is aware.

**JM:** Because we all do this *all the time*.

**ES:** I feel like we should ask some cis people about whether they have that understanding that they're performing all the time.

**AN:** They don't!  
**SS:** Some do, but yeah.

**AN:** That's the problem! But larp is an equalizer in that way, right? That's why there's safety in a larp pack and why we party so well at Knutepunkt — even if you're not trans, everyone has some kind of understanding that reality is a stack and you can play with it, and at the base layer we're all performing *something*.

**JM:** So larp levels the playing field when it comes to the creation of the self?

**ES:** There's also something about

**Larp levels the playing field when it comes to the creation of the self.**

the ensemble thing, though, right? Because we're not just aware that everyone is performing. There's this explicit trust and co-performance relationship that's happening. And you know that everybody kind of knows that.

**AN:** Everybody is performing and everybody needs to support everybody else in that performance.

**ES:** And if you say that you're X, of course I'm going to take that at face value, because *why wouldn't I?*

**AN:** That's why it's so hard to lie at larps; we interpret everything so kindly.

**JM:** And then in the real world, in the office, people are deeply invested in *not* doing this.

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**SS:** You said something that made me think — about making explicit the gender play in every role. That would do a lot, forcing people to think about it, because the privilege of cisness is that you don't have to think about gender.

**JM:** We often write very gendered characters in the backstory, but we're not explicit about it.

**AN:** And now a lot of larps now have gender-neutral casting —

**JM:** Not a fan.

**ES:** I hate it!

**AN:** Because all this is taken out, right?

**JM:** I realize I don't really play cis characters, but I don't really play trans characters, either. I'm just kind of *this guy* —

**ES:** I know what you mean.

**JM:** And it's not gender-neutral, but it's somehow resisting or even escaping the categories. But here's a conversation: When you larp, is your body your body? Are your scars your scars?

**SS:** It's complicated.

**JM:** Yeah, me too. I feel like I have a bit of a Schrödinger's body.

**SS:** I mean, the facts of our bodies are by and large inescapable. We can change them but that's not really something we do for larp. How we physically access this world is a fact, though we might experience the liminality in that particular larp moment.

**ES:** Obviously I acknowledge that I'm playing the character with the same body as I have otherwise, but it would never occur to me to think of any of the specificity of my body as belonging to the character. Almost like something that I have to do to play the character is to step away from the history of the body, because it's so bound up with identity — and not just identity, but path dependency and time and interaction with gatekeepers and all of this specific body history. For me to play a character it can't be the same body.



It has to be, at the very least, read through a soft focus.

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**JM:** Could we ever make a trans liberationist larp that cis people would get?

**ES:** What does liberation mean?

**JM:** [struggling] ... with this sort of idea baked into it that... I have to describe it negatively – no gatekeeping, no violence, no prejudice on the basis of a trans identity.

**ES:** That just sounds like freedom from oppression. That feels like a really low bar.

**JM:** Yeah, it does. I'm not going to fall into the trap of saying it's liberation from gender because I like gender and I think it's a nice flavor. But I could imagine something where fluidity is actually assumed for everyone?

**ES:** I don't want to play that game.

**JM:** Okay, not fluidity. But I somehow want the society I would like to see modeled in a larp, though I don't think it's so important to model the exact society so much as get something right in the design about the interaction. Why do we interact with gender and each other in a particular way?

**AN:** Another answer for a trans liberatory larp would be one that's for trans people, one that actually leaves the concerns of cis people behind. I don't know what that looks like –

**ES:** Me neither, but I would play that. Trans utopia sounds nice. I've never played a larp that is as queer as my life is. □

# LARP AS A PLAYER, LARP AS A CHARACTER

Text: Alessandro Giovannucci

## Engaging with the larp as a character and as a player.

We are all in an abusive relationship, and we all love this so much. It's the core of almost every larp, and it's an asymmetrical relationship between a human being - the player - and a pseudo human: the character. The "two interfaces theory" is a way to reflect about identity and agency from a new perspective, drawing from posthuman and object-oriented ontology studies.

When we larp we use two interfaces:  
1. The character, which is our way to engage with other participants. Through the mask of an alter ego we

interact with the others, put ourselves in the fictional world and follow the in-game narrative. Sometimes characters can be "guided" by different people during the same larp (by the plot, other players, supporting characters, designers, and so on).  
2. The player, the "real" person who is living the experience that affects us more individually, usually through the body. We are more aware of this interface while alone (walking in the location, going off-game, doing solitary tasks).

Sometimes we mix up those two interfaces. We slide from one to another without always being aware of it. But this theory also implies a certain degree of merging between the two interfaces. Can we say that a character is just a set of indications on a document? Or are they rather living creatures that we need to deal with? And are players sometimes just larp tools, instruments fulfilling the design?

Each one of the two interfaces have their own needs, drives, and goals, that sometimes collide. In a larp we can limit the agency of our character, and vice versa. Since the character is a pseudo-human, they can fail and be hurt in all kinds of ways: they just don't feel anything. Characters won't pay the consequences for their actions. Players

will. This is why this relationship can be seen as abusive.

We like to think that we are always in control of the two interfaces. But objects have a will, and offer resistance. Characters are the first "person" we have to negotiate with. In a larp with pre-written characters, they are a negotiation between us and the designer. When we write our own, then it's a negotiation between ourselves and what we think the larp will be.

And there is where the big conflict lies: characters need danger, players need to be safe. For now we use safety and steering to mediate between reality and fiction, between characters and players, what we want and what we need. In larp there is much more than just us. Let's listen and incorporate.

Alessandro Giovannucci in the larp *Brightfield*. Photo: Luca Tenaglia



THE ONLINE LARP ROAD TRIP

# THE ROAD ALREADY TRAVELED

**Text:** Ylva Otting

**With:** Sandy Bailly, Brian Bors, Debbie, Raúl Peña Fernández, Evie Hartman, Steve Hatherley, Sydney Mikosch, Will Osmond, Inge-Mette Petersen, Gerrit Reininghaus, Amalia Valero and Wibora Wildfeuer

**The pandemic was catastrophic for physical larp but also acted as the catalyst for the development of online larp.**

Larp has been heavily affected by the pandemic. For a long time physical larps weren't an option so people started trying online experiences. It felt like we were taking a (digital) road trip to see what was possible, tourists in this thing called online larp.

And what a trip it has been already! Obviously, online larps existed way before the pandemic hit, but it still felt like witnessing a creative revolution. With little to no experience in running games online in the case of most, designers started

experimenting and creating new games.

Even the name seemed to be up for discussion. The artform has been called "laog" (live action online game), digital larp and online larp, among other things.

## GAME FOR A YEAR

The experiments resulted in a wide range of games. For example, games were created with a playtime ranging from one hour to months (continuously). You could be sitting behind a laptop, or walking around, or be guided through the story through music, or lie on the ground in something akin to guided meditation. It could be video, with or without sound, or text only or voice only, or a combination of these options.

The creators of the larp could send emails before the larp, or use websites, or send letters or complete packages to your home address. The themes could be anything: serial high-fantasy, dystopian future, or current day slice of life. It could deal with very serious matters, or could be comedy and slapstick. The player could be the same as the character so what you see is what you get, or players could be represented by an avatar with a fake background. You could create art, or cook and eat together, or take a bath, make music, solve puzzles, and write fiction.

It made for a wide range of options available for interested players.

## LESSONS FOR DESIGNERS AND PLAYERS

It was a lot of experimenting, and not everything worked. The players learned how to dress up when your costume is only visible for the top half and from the front. Some people would stay behind their laptop unless there is explicit room to take a break, so bio breaks needed to be specifically added. It's not easy seeing if someone is ok if they're only visible on a screen, or not visible at all, so safety became more important. And having an online larp with 25 people in the same call for a longer period of time is not the best option, so designers created smaller groups.

The tech and internet wouldn't always work properly, and drop offs needed to be taken into account. And not all technology could be used by everybody, so people were limited in what to use.

Of course, technology created part of the experience and took a huge leap during the pandemic as well. The amount of new apps becoming available, or existing apps changing or adding new features, meant a whole lot of new options. Discord, Teams, Zoom and Jitsi were used to create online worlds. Proximity chat apps like Gather and SpatialChat were used to mimic the feeling of walking around and talking to other players. Adding a virtual background became a thing. Snapchat was used to alter player appearance.

Online larp has come a long way the last couple of years. So let's see some of the sights we have. witnessed along the way!



## SIGHTSEEING 1

# START FROM HOME

## From offline to online

**Gerrit Reininghaus** started with online larp when he moved to Central America because no other options were available. He started by translating physical larps like *Winterhorn* to the online larp format.

Converting from off- to online is something that happened a lot at the start of the pandemic. **Debbie** joined the online version of the larp *Empire*. When the pandemic started, they were playing tabletop roleplaying games but found it lacked the connection with the character. They also missed the interaction with the players from *Empire*.

The bards from *Empire*, basically the musicians who would perform during *Empire* in the live games before the pandemic, created online evenings for song and story time. Everybody could

join, in costume, and act like they would normally do at the physical larp around the campfire. A couple of people could sing or tell a story, using Twitch, and the audience could listen or comment using text.

Regular evenings would have 20 to 30 performers. It was a great reminder of what the characters were about, although it was less playing a character and more hanging around. People did get creative and did things that wouldn't have been available during the physical larp. For instance, a performance with a green screen and puppets, including recordings of the puppets which were played during the song.

## BOTS

**Steve Hatherley** turned the physical games he designed into online games at the start of the pandemic. He discovered that the usage of bots is an advantage for running games. Murder mystery was already a usable format for online so it didn't need must adjustment. People were starting to get together using Zoom and reeform games could be played

the same way. It did have limits for the amount of people that could play and the length of the game. Normally a weekend game with 60 to 70 people was possible but the online format meant adjusting this to a maximum of 25 people. The duration had to be capped at a couple of hours.

Debbie also joined the *Glasgow Vampire* larp, their first time larping online. It was a physical larp campaign turned online, mostly using only voice and a picture of the character but no video. Separate channels represented physical rooms.

The channels contained a description of the location and made it possible to play in a wide range of places. For Debbie, online made it possible to join the game because they don't live near the physical game location. It was easier to join the campaign as an online player.

After adapting physical larps for online play, Reininghaus started thinking about the real possibilities of online. One of the online larps Reininghaus created, *Make Up Moments*, was first run in 2018 and uses the camera as a mirror. It's for up to four players, and lasts one to two hours. Players put on makeup while talking to other players, in preparation for a big event.

Players see themselves in a mirror and other players can see them through the video. It ends with a selfie shared with others. This is something that wouldn't have been possible in a physical larp, and there are other technical and safety possibilities to explore as well. Reininghaus says he enjoys the accessibility, being able to do things you couldn't or wouldn't do offline. It's empowering.

Online turned out to be a safe environment where you can get a larp experience.

## SIGHTSEEING 2

# THE SPACE BETWEEN US

## Designed to be replayed

*The Space Between Us* is, without a doubt, the most run online one shot larp during the pandemic. The designer **Wibora Wildfeuer** created a complete design document which made it easy for others to run the game, and they have.

With translations into many languages, people playing it multiple times, the estimate is that it's been run over 50 times. Wildfeuer herself ran it 17 times. **Sydney Mikosch** ran

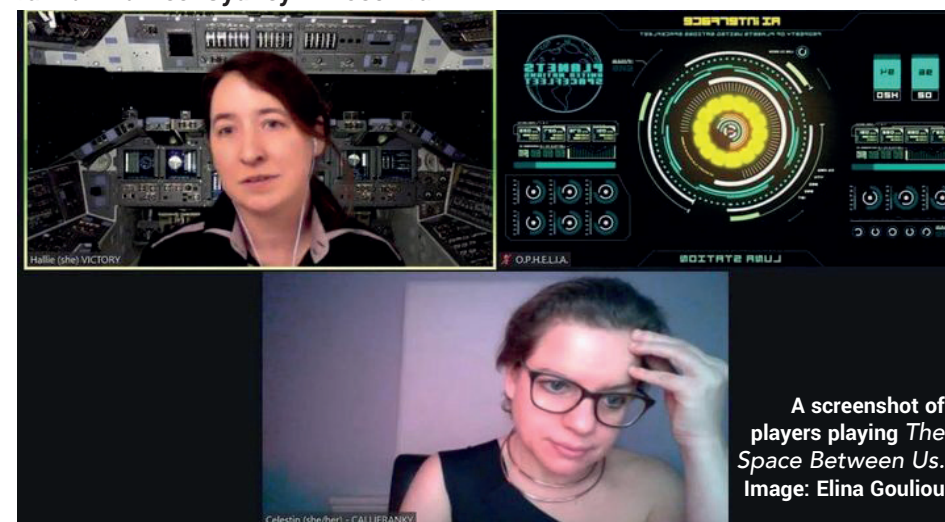
the larp 15 times, and described the experience as shutting your mind off for a couple of hours and being in another world with other people. They found it to be a very immersive larp, offering the possibility to create an experience together that sticks.

Wildfeuer didn't have any experience with online larps before the pandemic and played just a couple before she created *The Space Between Us*. She guesses that its success can be attributed to replayability and the pandemic.

"It wasn't written for Covid on purpose, but it has themes that coincide with Covid. Everybody wanted to larp, and it mirrors all the stuff that was happening in real life." The basic story has five family members, each in their own spaceship, trying to find a new

Earth. The players don't have to prepare except by reading their pre-written character which includes a separate secret role and the setting background. The larp contains a couple of different scenes and starts out without much interference by the organizer. Just the characters interacting with each other.

Wildfeuer designed the larp so that players as well as characters interact only via video. The larp is limited to five players and has a fixed amount of scenes. This created a structure and a setting where each player got the same amount of play time, but wasn't on screen the whole larp. Wildfeuer explained that she designed the characters as a family to make sure that the players felt a close connection, so the larp is mainly about the relationships and their past.



## MORE

You can learn more about Wibora Wildfeuer's work here: [Instagram.com/wiborawildfeuer](https://www.instagram.com/wiborawildfeuer). *The Space Between Us* is available here: [wiborawildfeuer.itch.io](https://wiborawildfeuer.itch.io)





A collage of the food made by the players during *I'll Have What They're Having*.  
Photos: Elina Gouliou, Patrik Bálint, Will Osmond, Andrea Vaghi and Ylva Otting

## Let's eat

It's special to have dinner together eating the same food, face to face or online. *I'll Have What They're Having* was a larp where you are eating together online, created by **Sandy Bailly**. The dinner wasn't brought to your table, you still had to cook it yourself, but all players were having the same dinner and were eating together. As member of the larp's crew **Amalia Valero** explained, it had a physical component while still being a digital larp.

The larp was a slice of life story with prewritten characters for 16 players set in a near future dystopia. You couldn't eat in a

physical restaurant so you had dinner online with the food being brought to your home. The players got the recipes in advance and could cook the food between the in-game acts

You formed a duo with another player and had dinner together with another duo. The people in the group swapped so you would have dinner with different people each time. It used Discord with different channels to simulate different restaurants.

The recipes gave people an option to try some new things. Players **Will Osmond** and **Sydney Mikosch** both still cook the food that was part of the larp. Osmond considers it a great experience, going beyond the obvious. Mikosch thought it was great fun to cook the food with the recipes provided during the breaks, and says cooking it now still brings up memories from the larp.

Bailly got the idea for the larp while watching the tv-series *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories*. Its stories revolve around food, and seemed really larpable. Eating food together forms a connection between people, even when you're not at the same location. The food you were eating could always be a subject to talk about. Unintentionally, it turned out as a feelgood larp.

The breaks were used to cook food, but also made sure that screen fatigue wasn't a thing, with enough time between two dishes.

The result was a low key slice of life larp, which brought people together and let them co-create the story. Just eating food together and having a good time.

# HACK FROM THE DAMN

## Hack the planet

*HackFromTheDamn* was an online larp based on the idea that in the near future quantum computers allow quantum hacking. It centered around a broker server where four different collectives could join an auction every week to bid on jobs and then have the rest of the week to prepare and run the jobs by hacking a server.

The mechanics for hacking were based on the board game *Space Alert*, and were basically a puzzle that needed to be solved in 10 minutes. The jobs generated cryptocurrency and a better reputation when they succeeded, and cost money and reputation if they didn't. The collectives could also interact with each other, the client who provided the job, or just hang out on the server.

The larp used Discord, with different channels for the different groups and clients. It had 2 bots, to keep track of the money and skills for every player, and to run the actual hack. Github was used to set up the

challenge with a random generator. People communicated through text chat and voice on Discord. Google Drive was used to share all documentation.

**Brian Bors** came up with the idea and started the larp after the first lockdown began. All physical larps he was running or playing shut down so he had nothing to do all of the sudden. He started asking people to form a larp team before having an explicit design. This resulted in a huge organizer team since other people didn't have much to do either.

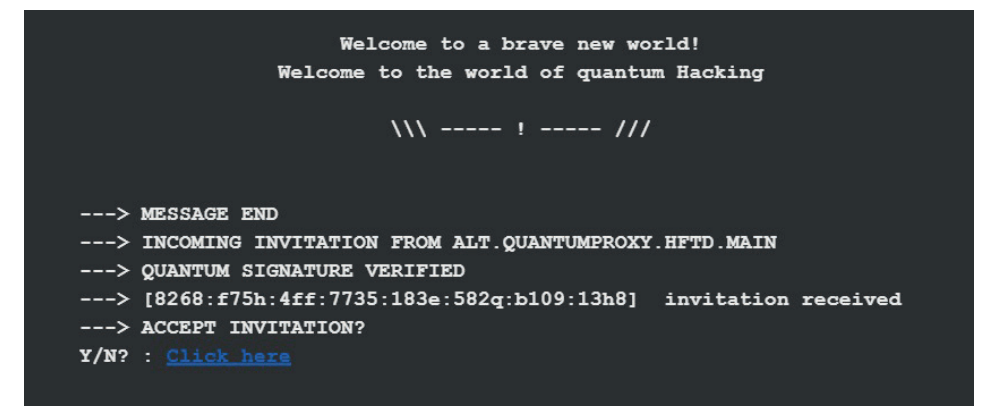
The setting and rule system were created in a couple of days, with the expectancy to run the larp for a couple of weeks. Instead, the larp ended after six months.

Both players and organizers

worked together creating the bots, the story, the background and the jobs, making short films and writing characters. After a couple of weeks the game was set up and the first auction and jobs were run. It wasn't part of the design to let the game continue 24/7. There was just the idea that the servers didn't have to be shut off after the auction and the hack. The result was that the players continued playing when they wanted. The game ran continuously from April 2020 to June 2020, then introduced breaks until it definitively ended in September 2020.

Bors said that the game was a joy to run and play, but wouldn't set up something like this again. The fact that the game ran continuously for so long made it too heavy for the organizers.

Part of the message inviting players to *Hack FromThe Damn*.  
Image: Ylva Otting





# SO MUCH TO SEE, SO LITTLE TIME

## An explosion of creativity

As with any road trip, there is so much more to see but not enough time to see it all.

### TAVERN QUESTS

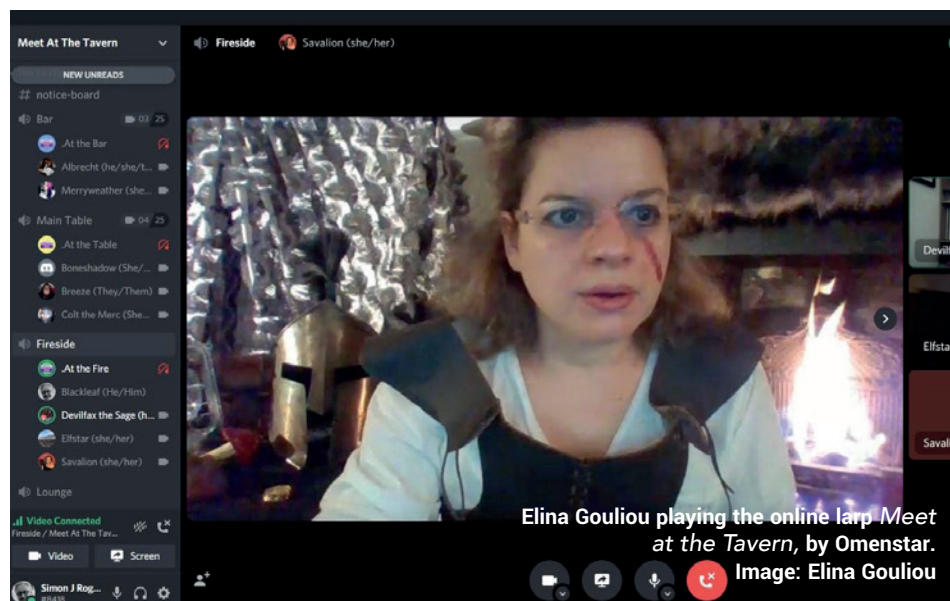
Each *Tavern Quest* game is titled according to the same format: *Meet At the Dungeon*, *Meet at the Space Station*, *Meet at the Shipwreck* and so on. They have different formats but the same design and tech. The story and characters are different for every meet, so characters can be meeting in a dungeon, or a tavern, or a space station. The play time is a couple of hours, and it's run on Discord, with the different channels being used for different rooms. It's a lighthearted drama where, as player **Will Osmond** explains, you try to do the worst thing possible and want to create as much chaos as you can.

### THE LOOP

*The Loop* is a weekend long larp where you play a character, or a catfish that is played by a character. It is a contest where characters are voted to leave a couple of times during the larp and then can reveal if they were who they said they were. It is text based, played on Discord. Player Amalia Valero commented that: "People are completely free to play whatever they want, not limited by their bodies."

### AFTER DARK

*After Dark* is about people sitting behind their webcam trying to communicate with each other without making noise, since it seems that noise is what attracts monsters that roam the streets. It can be played with for instance Zoom, and lasts a couple of hours. The relationships in the larp are a family, so it's easy to feel a deep connection with the other players.



Props and background for Elina Gouliou playing Zoe at Zoe's Christmas Task Force For Personal Betterment's first run, by Karolina Soltys, Patrik Bálint, Will Osmond and David Owen. Photo: Elina Gouliou

### TOGETHER FOREVER

*Together Forever* has different formats but is basically a weekend larp on Discord. You create a character, the relationships are created by the organizers, and you have a date in a near future dystopian future where you can't meet other people in person so you have to meet online. An AI will decide who you should be matched up with. **Inge-Mette Petersen** played most of the formats and thinks the larp is easier to play online than offline. It's a co-creative world where ideas from the players are incorporated into the story.

### ZOE'S CHRISTMAS TASK FORCE FOR PERSONAL BETTERMENT / ZOE'S EASTER EGG EXPERIENCE

A weekend larp inspired by tv series like *The Gilmore Girls*. It's a romcom. People find love, get married, break up, get sick. It used Discord and had channels to represent all the different locations: the bar, character's houses, the park and so on.

Inge-Mette Petersen playing Marina Daulnoy in *The Loop*. Photo: Inge-Mette Petersen





# THE ROAD AHEAD

Beautiful things to come!

Now that we've seen the sights along the road that brought us so far, it's time to look ahead at what we might expect in our future travels. We can start with the question of what are we going to call the opposite of online larp? Offline larp? In person larp? Physical larp? Or bluntly flesh larp, as suggested by **Will Osmond**.

In person, offline games are back on the table and up and running again, which has already resulted in declining interest in online larp. There are fewer online larps available, fewer players want to play online larps and fewer new larps being created. Online larp designer **Gerrit Reininghaus** expects online play to continue because the financial advantages and the option to play internationally are such obvious advantages. Designer **Sandy Bailly** suggests it will experience a resurgence in winter when there are less physical larps.

## THE ADVANTAGES OF ONLINE

Online larps still have the same advantages as before, being more accessible for people with physical issues, affordable, easy and environmentally friendly because players don't have to travel. You can meet players from all over the world. Osmond thinks that relationships during online play can be very intense, more so when the story is congruent with sitting behind a screen. Using channels or other options only available in a digital space also means that it's easier to switch between conversations, leave chats when things get overwhelming while still being able to continue to play.

Digital representation can make it easier to create a world and digital effects can be used. It can be just as immersive, or immersive in a different way, as in-person larp. **Sydney Mikosch** discovered that the online larpers seemed to have formed a strong community and think it will keep going. It can be fun to just play a more lighthearted short online game, when you want to socialize with other

people. As Amalia Valero pointed out, online larp tells stories you can't tell in a physical medium: "It's not going to be the huge thing it was during the pandemic, but it is its own medium and will tell its own story."

## HYBRID FORMS

One interesting avenue of exploration is hybrid larps, where parts of the larp are in person and parts are online. The in-game experience can be divided between in person and online, as seen in the German larp *Healing*, where some participants played online and others in person.

The same larp can have an online and an offline version, such as in the case of *Together Forever*. It started as an online larp, but has a physical run coming up in 2023.

Some things work better online than offline. Switching rooms, finding people, creating a spotlight for everyone, watching people without them watching you, turning your screen upside down, using bots to count money, creating spaces that are accessible for specific groups, asking for play and a 'dear diary' mechanic where you can explain to other players what your character is feeling.

The technology which will also advance. **Evie Hartman** is working on a website to compare the different options available (gvguide.com) and is also working on ways to compare the 150+ different (proximity) chat options available. According to Hartman, the spatial chat options are not yet perfect but they're getting there. The experience from the past couple of years is that platforms can be changed if people want it. She wants us to be louder as a community so we can help change the platforms. As she explained it: "Things developed for games will develop because people think it's fun."

Hartman thinks that the tallest mountaintop to climb will be Augmented Reality (AR), when it becomes possible for instance to find

objects in AR and not have to look for cards or other representations of those objects.

Online larps were an option before the pandemic, the pandemic caused lots of new stories and options to be added to the online experience and now we'll see where the artform goes next. □





# THE MANY NUANCES OF FAKE SEX

Text: Juhana Pettersson

**Three stories  
of playing  
sex scenes in  
larp.**

An intense moment at the larp *Redemption*.  
Photo: Kai Simon Fredriksen



I'm a late arrival in the world of larp sex. I played my first sex scene in the Spanish larp Conscience after already larping for over 20 years. I had married the bearded lady of the local brothel and she took me to celebrate our wedding night at her place of employment. A crew of cowboys were playing cards while we had larp sex next to them.

I had a good introduction to larp sex thanks to my co-player who built the scene very well, giving me things to react to until I got my bearings. Because I lacked experience, I was not a very dynamic player at first. My co-player pushed me down on the bed and started giving me a blowjob (mimed, as per the method used to simulate sex in that larp), giving me a few moments to collect myself and figure out how to play the scene.

Once I got myself together, I was able to contribute to the choreography and ideas present in play as well.

When I think back to that scene, it feels like it was interesting in terms of my character's story and the wider themes of the larp, but also as a larp scene consisting of nuanced interaction dynamics. It would have been interesting even without any narrative context.

Sometimes discussions of sex scenes in larp get reduced to their most basic terms: Adults pretend-fucking, dryhumping with their clothes on. Yet that reduction doesn't at all explain why these scenes are interesting to play.

## KEEP IT IN THE FAMILY

I interviewed a few different larpers for this article about their experiences with larp sex. Here's how one interviewee described a scene: "I came into the room, dancing slowly. I got lured towards the furniture by someone sitting on it. We knew we both wanted to be close by looking at each other, no words were spoken." "We started with a little bit of

touch, the player stood in front of a cupboard," he continued. "After brief foreplay, I was eagerly thrusting hard, enjoying myself, indulging in the moment. But then I realized the ghost of my stepson was watching me from behind. I became desperate to finish, trying not to disappoint him, putting pressure onto myself. Shame welling inside me, not being taken seriously as a man, a father, a role model!"

"Did I come? I don't know. Probably not. I sank to the ground before him. I wanted this family to become whole, to heal the wound that his mother's suicide and our grief left."

"I wanted to ask him for forgiveness - remembering what my living stepson had said about his mother after the eulogy."

"The words I used while kneeling before him were: 'May I be your Daddy?.' The worst possible choice."

"He was grinning. He pushed me over. He threw my daughter's wedding crown on my chest and laughed."

"Tears leading to numbness leading to nothing."

"At the back of the room someone bit a piece out of a candle, as if they were finishing a snack after being stunned by a shocking movie scene."

When I asked for experiences, most I heard about were like this. Complex, emotional and about many things besides the sex itself. A few were so complex that I couldn't quote them here because explaining all the necessary context would have taken up too much space.

## QUESTIONABLE THEMES

Sometimes when we're in the circle of trust engendered by larp, we play out scenes that are kinda fucked up. This applies to sex scenes

perhaps more than any other type of situation. I've wondered whether this is because we're not actually having real physical sex, we want to make the scene interesting by coming up with narrative and thematic complications which often leads into strange territory. It also often leads to complex, interesting larp scenes.

One interviewee described a grand scene involving necromancy, vagina dentata and sacrificing one's soul. The woman at the center of that scene described her experience like this:

"I think my character was a very dominant and powerful woman at night, and she thought of herself as stronger than others. That is why she wanted to be the vessel and risked herself for that. I think it was also a show off about how far she could go to prove that strength to others, and me as a player had so much fun!"

She reflects further on how it felt: "It was super exciting, increasingly as it progressed and other characters took part in it. It also felt very sensual and macabre."

At the start of the scene, her character was helpless, but then as the scene progressed power relations were reversed and she took control. Another player who was part of the scene says:

"Eventually she was consuming us, and I can remember a point at which my authentic 1930s nightwear was being ripped of as a ritual flaying at the behest of Laura's corpse, towering over all of us in a display of complete and total domination."

This applies to all larp, but especially to playing sex scenes: A culture of consent and trust makes it possible for players to relax and feel safe enough to go into dark, intimate territory if they so choose.

## INTIMACY

Often the most meaningful larp scenes, and larp sex scenes, are small and intimate. They may not be explosive or theatrical but for the people involved in them, they mean a lot.

An interviewee says:

"One larp had two sex scenes that were very different even though I was playing the same character in both. For both sex was represented theater style, essentially dry humping but with barriers (underwear) between any genital contact. The first was a scene in which my character was cheating on his wife. The scene was playful and enticing, showing a relationship that though very physically dominant in bed, was clearly enjoyable for both parties, with a sense of illicit fun to it.

The other scene I had in the same larp was with my character's wife, who was in an abusive relationship with my character, and occurred right after a fight between the two of them. It was a consensual encounter in play, and there was a great deal of mutual attraction and passion in it, but there was desperation as well, and a sense of emotional pain and hurt that made it vastly different from the fun and playful scene before.

I appreciated that the game had both of these scenes in it, because in the first I felt I could see how my character's relationship with his wife may have been in the past - playful, fun, emotionally fulfilling - while the second showed in stark contrast the damage to the relationship the cycle of abuse created, and the desperate need they both had to recapture the emotional connection they once had. The second scene in many ways was more passionate and emotionally intense, but the two characters were out of tune, both lost in themselves as they tried to recreate something lost, while the first, though less emotionally intense, was fully in sync.

I really loved that we were able to use that physicality to say so much about the relationships of the characters, and I feel it really helped to have the raw physicality of that style of theater sex as well. I don't feel I could have gotten those emotions across as well using a more abstracted method."

The emotions we see at play in this description range from pain to wistfulness. I don't believe that all, or even most sex scenes in larp are necessarily this deep, but the ones that people remember and want to talk about almost universally are. The ones that get stuck in your memory, that you need to reflect on weeks, months and years after the larp.

## SEX SCENES AND OTHER SCENES

Does it make sense to separate sex scenes from other scenes in larp? All of the stories in this article show larp sex as part of the broader tapestry of interaction comprising the full larp experience.

I suppose the reason we single out the sex scene is because of general taboos regarding sex and because like violence, it's almost always simulated in some way instead of being played out for real.

Still, sex is an important vector of human interaction. Sexual interactions teach us about each other and allow us to explore new emotional territory. Because larp is all about human interaction, it stands to reason that all the strange ways sexuality manifests between us should be reflected in our larps as well.

The fictional frame of larp allows us to explore and mime out sexual scenarios and themes that we would not be able to experience as ourselves in our ordinary lives. In this, sex is much the same as any other facet of the human experience that we simulate in larp. □



# EXPLORING LARP LANDSCAPES



Scolding the kids for being naughty at *Foster Home*, 2021.  
Photo: Alexiou Alexandros

Text: Alexiou Alexandros

## The journey of a young Greek larp professional.

I am Alex, a 25 year old dude from Greece, who started larping eight years ago. My early interest soon became an obsession, and I just had to understand the subject and experiment as much as humanly possible. After running about 70 games, participating in an abundance of European larps and designing for seven years, this is what the landscape looks like to me.

As my journey progressed, a bunch of friends and I created a company called LARPiFiers catering to educational larp, usually through non-formal education methodologies. The LARPiFiers have been legally established as a non-profit organization since January 2020. The main objective of our organization is to use game-based and theatrical methodologies, primarily larp, to promote various educational and personal development initiatives.

### HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Roleplaying games have been a part of my life for as long as I remember, and they have been a companion in crucial moments of my life. When you doubt yourself, yet your character needs to be confident, when you are sad, yet you are playing a cheerful character, when you lack responsibility, yet your character has to save the land.

What used to be my favorite pastime was also a way to make myself better – and larp did the same, when I first happened upon it fresh out of school. For the first time, I could feel the characters dancing in my skin, itching to come to life – dragging me to be better, to be more, to feel more and to express myself in ways I couldn't imagine were possible.

The more I saw what larp got out of me, the more I wanted to share it with the world. This is why I

started designing games. From Anglo-Saxon combat larps, to *Vampire: The Masquerade*, to educational, to abstract, I fell in love with what games brought out of people. I loved making breaking points for characters. Seeing players feel a character's dilemmas and choices so profoundly that they would cry, vent, and experience something life changing – all through a mask, the facade of a fake character, that was still very much real.

In an era where social media makes human touch so alien yet so approachable, where expression is superficial, and art is a consumable mass produced industry, I find larp to provide genuine experiences – humanity in a package deal, and I seek to explore more of what this has to offer. Larp has provided me with a mirror in which to reflect myself; and though I find Larp a tool for self-enlightenment, it is fascinating how different players experience larp and

what they consider it to be.

### AN AWKWARD FIRST STEP

At the time I was first introduced to larp, the local scene in my home country was young, barely a year old, still figuring things out, with costumes that were largely t-shirts with trinkets, bulky boffer weapons and props made out solely of duct tape. It wasn't the theatrics of the hobby that kept me – but rather the people. For once, it felt like the internal call for adventure, roleplaying, medieval themed fantasy, wasn't a lonely impulse. It felt like there are more like minded people in the world. That's how they get you!

From this standpoint, larp looked kind of dumb to me. The story wasn't really inspiring, most players were rather unconvincing in their roles, and the objectives were extremely obscure and made no

sense. Yet within me, I felt something that I hadn't felt in roleplaying before. I felt fear. I didn't want to die in that game.

Be it because I wanted to "win" or because I wanted to "prove" myself (both problematic concepts for the game), I was alone in the woods, fearing that if I got touched by a piece of foam and tape, something bad would happen. With fear came adrenaline.

My first larp experience wasn't much to brag about – neither was it much to remember. It did however give me the drive to explore the larp landscape further – I knew there was something hidden deeper underneath, and that something was giving me life lessons.

The awkward first lesson was: "Stop trying to control the outcome of everything around you". Alas, I was too young to notice...





Conspiring ladies at *Faceless Masquerade*, 2020.  
Photo: Alexandra Mavroudaki

## INK AND QUILL

After that first event, I picked up the Pen of Creation, and joined the game as an organizer. I started organizing games, trying to figure out what makes them unique. Back then – I was clueless – I thought a good game pushes the limits of imagination, expands the rules to make anything possible, and implements mini-games for things that were impossible to do for real (such as crafting or “stealing”). At first, I thought my larps were horrendous – when I witnessed them play out I had no idea how a person could have fun in them.

Yet people still came to me after the larp, sharing their excitement, and telling me how great the game was. I was baffled, but the Pen – as we all know, holds no answers. It just keeps writing, in hope the answers come to it one day.

The Greek community is mostly combat oriented so larps in the Anglo-Saxon style were my first landscape. Our community trains together every week, meeting up every Sunday to battle. I learned to implement combat in my games – yet after four years, while the others kept being enthusiastic about it, I grew tired. I wanted to set out for new lands. Preferably, lands that relied more on the human aspect I so craved.

## A MONSTER IN DISGUISE

It was around that time that I took my first journeys abroad, playing larps in foreign countries. The first stop was Bulgaria, with which we have a sibling relationship as larp communities – larp started in Greece with the help of the Bulgarian community. There’s a large community of around 300 players, from Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, ready to offer you the full Balkan experience! My first larp abroad used rules that were mostly guidelines, and in true Balkan fashion, the game revolved a lot around war and violence, focusing on the people who created content

for it. Experienced players make plot lines on the spot, the general premise or objectives are less important than the player made content, and everything is less strict and scripted. The goosebumps came once more and I became a regular. I discovered my love for playing the adversary – I became the monster in disguise.

It was then that I found my place in the larp landscape. Putting on the monster costume, lighting up the red glowing eyes, and finding ways to flesh out that monster’s concept in as many creative ways



A poor monster bullied by hunters at *The Fog*, 2021.  
Photo: Panagiotis Markopoulos



Pay your respects to the Prophet! At *The Voice of Truth*, 2018.  
Photo: Melina Margariti

as I can - doing audio mixing for background sounds, wearing the right perfume so people know you are coming from a distance. But mostly it boiled down to wearing the confidence and pride of the monster – becoming inhuman, shifting your body language to something intimidating and getting to know your body – as well as learning how to interact with people so you’re scary, yet alluring.

The mantle of the monster led me to the demon Hades, and his siblings, and my best larp experience. There I was, sitting outside a fort of humans trying to belittle me from atop their walls during a downpour. As I screamed at the top of my lungs and kicked at the door to bring the

whole fort down, lightning cracked, and wind swept the tents around. The people looked at me as if I had brought forth the apocalypse!

## THE PATH BECOMES CLEAR

My understanding of larp was that it is a pastime for people born with a knack for fantasy. I’ve since come to believe that larp is the manifestation of a very human desire. We are drawn to stories, the concept of narrative. Not just drawn – addicted. Our favorite people have a story tied to them, the most famous celebrities, the advertisement for your favorite drink, your favorite movie. It all boils down to a story that touches your very core, and makes us feel one with it.



Larp is the need for people to spin their own tale and communicate their own story. Brag about their achievements around the fire at the after party. Everyone is open to hearing stories, stories that cause FOMO (fear of missing out) – and makes you dream about all the ways the story could have been spun around had you been there. These stories stay with you, during a tough work shift, when you speak to friends in the months to come, when you prepare for the next larp.

We live in a world where social media dominates – and there isn't a day when we won't see someone being better at us, someone achieving something great, someone to be jealous of. Larp is a silent combatant against this impending doom that comes with the modern world. It is the ground on which to fight back and make your own story. A story that may not become viral, or hold significance, or even be good – but it's a personal story that speaks to you. Larp is all about making room for these little stories to bloom, like a garden of cognitive story writing, offering the Pen of Creation to everyone.

## GALLOPING ONWARD

From then on, the journey led me to larp with Croatians, Danes, Poles, Swedes, Italians and Hungarians, meeting people from different cultural backgrounds and talking with them about their experiences. I met up with the Austrian community, took part in larp conventions and Erasmus programs with a larp background. And that is when things get convoluted – I was used to a more Balkan approach of all things larp (which, bluntly speaking, is to push you to a pool and let you find out how to swim), which was very much not the case with other communities.

In the Nordic larp scene, I found peace and quiet, people giving time and space for everyone to make their story – while my personal experience was that of competition

and grabbing what you want by your own skill. I saw games that left me awestruck with how simple yet effective they were, and games that were rather dull and uninspired.

They all shared one thing in common – at the end of the day, everyone had a story to tell. My initial assessment seemed to be the right one, and I wanted to experiment more and more. However, I didn't want to build great narratives any more – I wanted to let players explore what kind of experience they are looking

for, themselves. Hence, I set upon the path of abstract larps.

I wanted everything to be obscure, and for people to make meaning out of everything themselves. No costumes, no smoke, no mirrors – just archetypes, feelings and reactions – the rawest possible larp experience.



This is me at *Faceless Masquerade*, 2020.  
Photo: Magdalene Krzesniak

A mother sends her son off to battle in  
*Heroes Calling*, 2019.  
Photo: Anastasia Wish







# Daemon

*A larp by Narrators Inc.*

*Austin (TX)*  
USA

31.3.–2.4.2023

*Co-organised with  
Journeys and Tales*

*Norwich*  
UK

5.–7.5.2023

*Co-organised with  
larpX*

*Visé*  
BELGIUM

27.–29.5.2023

*Co-organised with  
BElarp*

[HTTPS://DAEMON.NARRATORS.EU/LIVE/](https://daemon.narrators.eu/live/)

FACEBOOK GROUP: DAEMON – A LARP BY NARRATORS INC.

## THE MANTLE OF THE PLAYER

As I grow older, I don't want larp to offer me the same things it did before. Once I craved to just fight others and be the best fighter around. Then I witnessed a close friend crying, during an intense abstract game debriefing, finally managing to express inner feelings about a real life problem that she couldn't come to terms with before. And then I wanted this. I wanted people to feel free to feel again. To be able to break down, or shout, or simply exist, when the reality of our lives is so hostile. To meet new people in and out of character, and get their genuine reactions throughout the game. See them scared, or sad, and how that affects them. Make real connections through a fake reality. I see that I no longer wish to just prove myself

better throughout my games. I either want to be the obstacle that other players need to overcome, or entirely human.

One of my most fun experiences has been playing a person that was utterly scared of everything, fainted when touched by a woman, or saw a monster, or a blade, and mostly talked with people about life's traumas. Although the character was mostly comic relief, they experienced real connection with people – consolation for their past, advice on how to approach their beloved, and even offers of protection by the larger, scarier fighters.

I finally heeded the lesson my first larp gave me. I no longer controlled what was happening around the game, and was completely and utterly at the mercy of my co-players.

## BE HUMAN

Larp has taught me to be competitive and aggressive. It also taught me to be mellow and mild. To cry and shout. To face adversity and come on top. But what it mostly taught me is that everything I thought about humans was a societal construct. That it is, for example, okay to cry in front of strangers and express what you truly feel – but it only becomes apparent to everyone when it is part of their own story.

When they too have a say in it.

When they can choose what type of a character – excuse me – a human they choose to be.

That's all that larp gives you. A chance to realize your ideal version of a human being. □



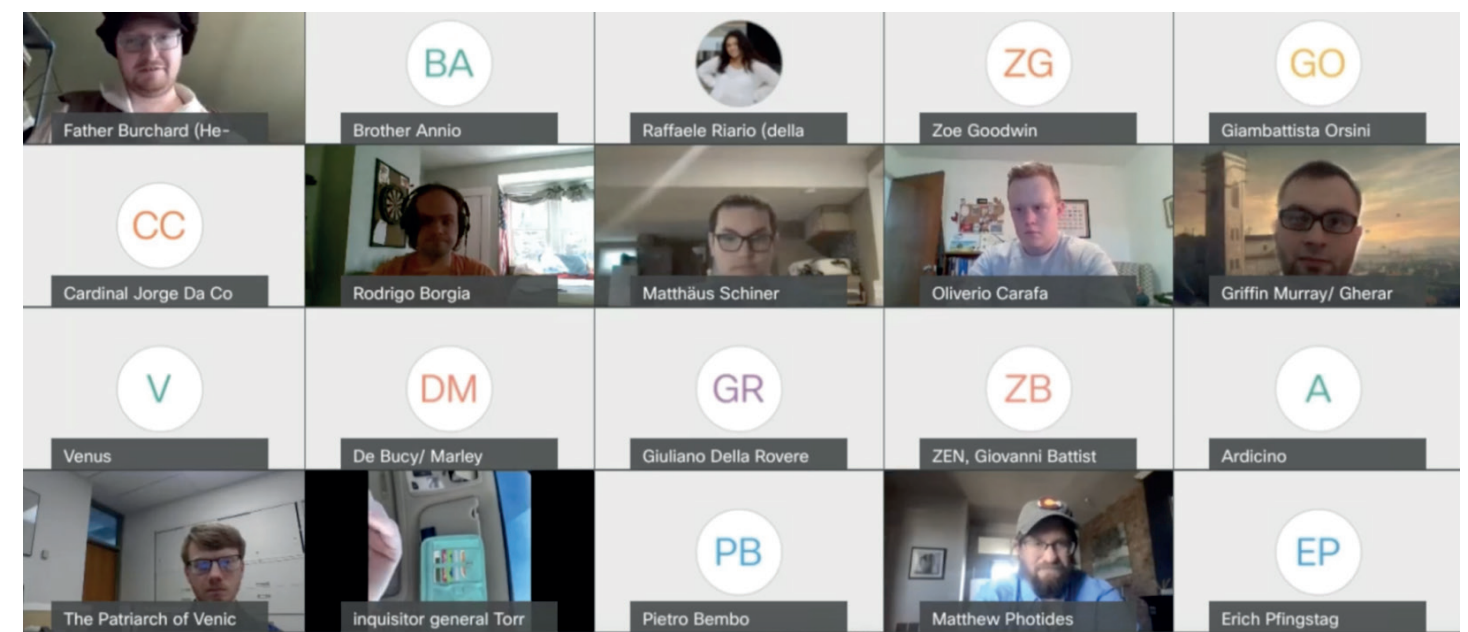
Before the Champion of Justice at *A Kingdom In Tatters*, 2017.  
Photo: Mina Vlastari



# PANDEMIC LARP IMPROVISATION

Text: Evan Torner

**Larp organizers have learned a thing or two about organizing scenarios. How have we applied those skills during the COVID-19 pandemic?**



Screenshot of the crucial Zoom call in which University of Cincinnati students role-played cardinals electing a pope.



If nothing else, larping means *engagement*. Players invest themselves in bringing made-up characters to life, mapping a fictional world onto our real world. During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic of the past several years, engagement became a scarce commodity.

Every organization, be it schools or businesses or governments, wanted to re-engage with its constituency who, through pandemic isolation and general neoliberal precarity, had understandably become detached from society and lacked the necessary motivation to do most activities of institutional benefit. You know: all of us.

Ironically, just as we ourselves as larpers could no longer gather – since our events are natural super-spreaders of any number of diseases, including COVID-19 – my own larp expertise began to be called upon as an asset and skillset. I started getting messages from Fortune 500 companies and major news outlets about this thing called “larp,” which could then be leveraged to win back – you guessed it – engagement from their customers, students, and volunteers.

My tales of pandemic-era collaborations in non-larp and larp-adjacent contexts highlight both the very special medium (of larp) with which we work, as well as the limitations of such collaborations.

TEMPTEMUS PAPAM

The 1492 Papal Election was an absolute shitshow, and I ran it as an online larp for a history class at my university.

The conversation began in fall 2020 when **Dr. Susan Longfield-Karr** in the History department at the University of Cincinnati reached out to me as Director of the UC Game Lab about running a “papal election larp” called *Temptemus Papam* that famous SF author and historian **Ada Palmer** ran at University of Chicago in 2018. I took one look at the materials as a larpwright and was overwhelmed: over 50 character sheets 6-12 pages in length, with many different overlapping subsystems for combat, intrigue, religious favors, economics, and inheritance. Hundreds upon hundreds of pages lay before me, all during a time when my *own* patience for this much reading was stretched to its natural limits. I agreed to do the project on one condition: I would need to substantively pare down the material and scope of the game, in addition to adapting it to a remote experience rather than an in-person one. Dr. Longfield-Karr agreed. The UC Papal Election Game was born.

We transformed *Temptemus Papam* into a correspondence game, like the old play-by-mail *Diplomacy* runs. Over the course of 8 weeks, player-characters would exchange virtual letters with each other while sending “orders” for any character

action to me. Every week, a video would be posted online with updates and the results of the previous week’s orders, giving the players a sense of agency and impact. All of these videos and the letters would be stored in a shared online folder, from which the passive players taking on the roles of historians could assemble the history of this particular election based on player-generated “primary documents.”

Dr. Longfield-Karr and I tapped into 2 different funds available to us and hired ourselves a larp team: history student **Matthew Photides** made hundreds upon hundreds of shared folders to deposit letter correspondence, **Erich Pfingstag** made the videos, and **Felicity Moran** assisted with student communication. We had intrigue, kidnapping attempts, and even a few cat-and-mouse murders as letters flew.

Several faculty playing NPCs got very involved in their characters, leading me to believe that participant safety is equally important for non-players. Two Zoom meetings let us first conduct the papal election, and then inaugurate the new pope, who turned out to be **Rodrigo Borgia**, the very person actually elected pope in 1492.

D&D SPEED DATING

Shared-folder correspondence was only one form of online larping I organized. Another was in the long-standing virtual community *Second Life*, as part of the event SLarpFest organized by **Celia Pearce** and **Jenn Frank** in 2021 at the IndieCade island. The game I ran was **Marc Majcher’s** *First Impressions*, a *Dungeons & Dragons* -style speed-dating larp from his book *Twenty-Four Game Poems*.

The premise of the game is simple: a group of fantasy adventurers go on a series of “dates” to determine whom they’d like to include in their questing party. Players get to embody fairly basic



fantasy stereotypes while also deepening their own relationships with each other – often roleplayers whom they’ve just met. In-person at conventions, I can run the game for 8 people in about an hour. The reason why I run it at conventions is also the reason why it worked well in *Second Life*: it’s short and it helps people navigate an awkward social situation. Most of our players knew either *Second Life* or larp, but almost no one knew both well. They’d switch partners maybe 3 or 4 times, with me calling them back to the tavern each time.

Players felt safe enough to experiment with their avatars and their roleplay without too much worry about the stakes or consequences. *First Impressions* in fact served as a “warm-up” larp for other, more intimate and serious SLarpFest games: *Angel Falls*, a funeral larp inspired by **Wim Wenders’** *Wings of Desire* (1987) by Pearce, Frank, and **Annika Waern, Athena Peters’** Regency matchmaking game *Romancing Jan*, and *The Sleepover* by **Julia B. Ellingboe** and **Kat Jones** from the *Honey and Hot Wax* anthology, which deals with teen queerness and sexuality.

All of us at SLarpFest were

veteran larp organizers, and thus understood the relationship of comfort, safety, and community-building even in an online space: seemingly “silly” games like *First Impressions* build the trust necessary to take further role-play risks. Many of us have been running games on Discord, Zoom, and now *Second Life* for several pandemic rules, and our previous in-person larp experience directly applies to building necessary trust and competence in online spheres.

ONGOING AND UPWARDS

Organizing continues! Jones and I have joined the writing team for JEWEL, a 2-day interactive experience for Jewish teens in Cincinnati. We’re using the larp design toolbox to help plan an event in which the participants experience Moses’ teachings and then mourn at his funeral. JEWEL is intended to reconnect Jewish youth with the social-justice meanings and embodied nature of their beliefs. But it is also an opportunity. JEWEL lets us take part in an exciting new world of event planning, in which larp activities can

be integrated into broader community events with large constituencies and deeper pockets.

“Larping exists in various other activities besides larps,” wrote **J. Tuomas Harviainen** in his 2011 article “The Larping that is Not Larp.” This persistent fact is solace during a time in which we’ve all become radically separated from one another and larps themselves are endangered by logistical and pandemic-level uncertainties. Our own generation of larpwrights are now, voluntarily or not, performing what **Rudi Dutschke** called “the long march through the institutions”: the incorporation of larping into whatever organizations we serve, with whomever will take a chance on our vibrant and evolving form.

These organizations have, at last, discovered that *engagement* isn’t to be taken for granted. We as larpwrights can now choose to engage, too. □

	Maffeo Gherardi, THE PATRIARCH of Venice	February 2, 2021	Torner, Evan (torneren)	59 items		Shared
	Matthäus SCHINER	February 2, 2021	Torner, Evan (torneren)	60 items		Shared
	Michel DE BUCY	February 2, 2021	Torner, Evan (torneren)	57 items		Shared
	Not Used Characters	February 12, 2021	Photides, Matthew (photid)	1 item		Shared
	Oliviero CARAFA	February 2, 2021	Torner, Evan (torneren)	60 items		Shared
	Pico della MIRANDOLA	February 17, 2021	Photides, Matthew (photid)	7 items		Shared
	Pierre D'AUBUSSON	February 2, 2021	Torner, Evan (torneren)	60 items		Shared
	Pietro BEMBO	February 2, 2021	Torner, Evan (torneren)	62 items		Shared
	Raffaele RIARIO	February 2, 2021	Torner, Evan (torneren)	57 items		Shared
	René DE PRIE	February 5, 2021	Torner, Evan (torneren)	57 items		Shared
	Rodrigo BORGIA	February 2, 2021	Torner, Evan (torneren)	57 items		Shared
	Sultan BAYEZID of the Ottoman Empire	February 2, 2021	Torner, Evan (torneren)	57 items		Shared

One of the many shared online folders containing letter correspondence in the UC Papal Election Game.



Text: Mike Pohjola

**We got in touch with some experienced larpers and tabletop roleplayers to ask how they view the act of roleplaying. Participants from various backgrounds took the time to explain what really makes them tick when playing a role.**

The four questions presented were these. Feel free to consider your own answer to them, as well!

- 1** Is roleplaying a skill that can be learned?
- 2** What makes a roleplayer (larp or tabletop) a good player?
- 3** Does roleplaying happen inside your head or on the outside, performing your character to others?
- 4** What advice would you give to a person who wishes to become a better player in larp or tabletop?

# HOW TO PLAY

## KARJIN VAN DER HEIJ

Larp designer  
Netherlands

1. We can get better at many aspects of roleplaying by growing confidence, experimenting with new things, and imitating others. For me the constant process by which this happens is one of the most interesting aspects of larp.

2. Being able to be part of a bigger whole, and to lift others and allow themselves to be lifted. For me the most beautiful moments are the ones where the larp is transparent and I know the back story, and I can watch entire conversations taking place underneath other conversations, with meaningful looks and body language and many things unsaid.

3. I have been given compliments about being easy to read, especially in facial expressions. That all comes from feeling and believing in the character. The opposite is also true, when the character does not work for me I have a hard time emoting in a natural way.

Karijn van der Heij in the larp *Conscience*.  
Photo: Stefano Kewan Lee



Elli Leppä in the larp *Haaksirikko* (Shipwreck).  
Photo: Tuomas Puikkonen



4. Try to create energy and play, but spreading play to others does not always mean you have to climb on a chair. It can be as small as leaking a really bad piece of gossip to the worst possible person, or being an attentive listener to someone's heartfelt confession.



Liselle Awwal in the larp *The Last Song*.  
Photo: Liselle Awwal

★LISELLE AWWAL

Crafter  
Denmark

1. For sure! Many aspects of roleplaying rely on skills which can be rehearsed and honed with practice. Improvisation is a big one, but awareness of things such as posture and how you use your voice also factor into how well a person is able to portray a character, and perhaps also how confident and comfortable they feel doing so.

2. Being able to communicate with other players is somewhat essential. Without a willingness to engage with other people, one does not get very far. People who are attentive and generous with their attention often make for good players.

3. If I feel immersed in a character and story, roleplaying happens both externally and internally, but it is

entirely possible for roleplay to be mostly a performance.

4. Dare more. Speak up. Trusting that your contribution is worthwhile can be an uphill battle, but the regret you feel from all the "if only" moments in your roleplaying career may well be worth the attempt. Your joke may elicit laughter and your snappy comeback or epic one-liner may land, increasingly more so the more you practice them.



Kjell Hugaas in the larp *Odysseys*.  
Photo: Kjell Hugaas

★KJELL HUGAAS

Larpwright  
Norway

1. Rather than a single skill, I believe that role-playing is a set of skills that can be learned and trained.

2. An ensemble of players that works well together is the basis for any good role-playing experience. As such, the main skill I would highlight is the ability to listen and cooperate with your co-players. The best roleplaying experiences stem from an ensemble of players working well together, rather than just from the skills of the one that happens to be in the spotlight at the time. Personally, I have had the great privilege of playing with, and learning from a whole host

of great ensemble-minded players over the years, for which I am very grateful.

3. I believe that roleplaying needs both, but there is a wide range of mixes of the two that suit different game experiences better or worse.

4. Be curious, stay humble, be open and eager for feedback, and learn from your co-players. And most importantly: Have fun and try not to worry too much. There are a million ways to role-play any given scene, and there is no single one that is the "right one".



James Edward Raggi IV.  
Photo: Eliza Rask

★JAMES EDWARD RAGGI IV

Designer and publisher of  
*Lamentations of the Flame Princess*  
Finland / United States

1. Yes. Does anyone really think somebody showing up for their first ever game is as good at playing the game as they'll ever be?

2. If you're playing an ongoing tabletop game, learning the rules, so you don't hold up the game. Paying attention, and maybe even taking notes, concerning the setting

and adventure and NPC notes, so when you interact with them, you can help the other players' immersion by using actual in-setting names instead of generic signifiers ("the bad guys," "our quest-giver" type things). When joining an existing group, being able to sort out the vibe and way of doing things, and adapting your own play style so as not to be disruptive.

3. It's definitely in the "performance," which doesn't necessarily mean first-person inhabit-the-character performance. A lot of what goes into the outward performance happens in one's head, but bad roleplaying without thinking is still roleplaying, and a clever, wonderful concept that's never expressed to the world isn't much of anything.

4. The number one thing is just to pay attention.



Elli Leppä in the larp *Antikristuksen yö* (The Night of the Antichrist).  
Photo: Nino Hynninen

★ELLI LEPPÄ

Poet  
Finland

1. Yes, absolutely. As with any other skill, you can learn by example or by methodical study and practice, and your surroundings (co-players, game

master, other social environs) can either help or hamper learning.

2. Paying attention to what others (other players, NPCs, game master) are doing. Being quick on the uptake. Expressive output (gestures, mimetics, tone of voice). Genuine interest in the game/fiction and in working with your group. An attitude of "yes, and", meaning engaging with the ideas of others and bringing your own views, ideas and wishes forward. Being generous and sensitive.

3. Both. You can roleplay entirely inside your head. But in a larp you might have a tremendously powerful moment completely alone, doing nothing visible, but having momentous thoughts and inner experiences in-character.

4. Reflect on your own experiences and try to remember instances where you felt you succeeded particularly well, and what contributed to it. Follow the example of good players you know. You could even ask them for advice. Ask for feedback. Tell your co-players about your wish to develop and find out how to move towards that goal together, keeping in mind your aims as a group.



Christopher Sandberg.  
Photo: John-Paul Bichard

★CHRISTOPHER SANDBERG

Managing Director of Visby Medieval Week  
Sweden

1 Certainly. It's ten different skills in concert, like reading the room, embodying a character, letting go and inviting others. Childishness and imagination are personal traits from the start, but like any expression and creativity there are keys and insights you'll pick up over time. And tricks and training you can learn from. And the group develops a shorthand and unspoken table rules the same as any ensemble, artist collective or sports team.

2. For you, getting better is more about flow and passion. For those around you, it's partly performative, partly attentiveness. Being present and communicative. Mashed together it's storytelling through storyliving.

3. Roleplaying creates the text outside, and makes meaning inside. It can be solo play, but mostly it's *between* a group of people. It is created in the exchange.

4. Have so much fun together with others that you end up playing it over and over again to grow. Key being "with others," it's definitely a team sport. And like anything, getting experiences and perspectives that make you creative and empathetic is good. Luckily, that's exactly what larp gives you. □





# THE CHINESE HOTPOT

Text: Xiong Shuo, Wen Ruoyu & Mátyás Hartyándi

After the explosive growth of the last five years, China now has the biggest larp business in the world.

The emergence of pervasive games in China, the largest game market all over the world, was very fast and drastic. The most popular examples, escape rooms (ERs) and murder mystery games (MMG) called *jubensha* (剧本杀, script murder) quickly conquered China's urban youth.

## THE SHORT HISTORY OF CHINESE MURDER MYSTERIES

Chinese crime genres like *gong'an* have entertained their readers with horror, suspense, and mystery solving for a long time and created the conditions for murder mystery games in China. Some sources say that deductive games like *Werewolf* were already part of the Chinese underground gamer scene when escape rooms entered China around 2012.

Then in 2013, a murder mystery boardgame named *Death Wear White* was imported into China, which some see as the origin of *jubensha*. Soon, a steady stream of original Chinese 'script murders' (e.g. the excellent *The Magnificent Ambersons* series) were produced. But they did not draw mainstream attention until 2016, when Mango TV

released a variety program named *Who's The Murderer*, a South Korean reality TV import. Watching celebrities play *jubensha* became the coolest thing for Chinese youth.

During the pandemic of Covid-19, online *jubensha* applications became a popular form of social interaction and entertainment. Not restricted by time and space, it was a very convenient and efficient way to kill time and solve loneliness during quarantine periods.

Meanwhile, the booming escape room industry started to fuse *jubensha* with immersive spaces. During its first decade, Chinese escape rooms became more interactive and technologically enhanced, adding large-scale and high production value environments, narrative elements, player roles, and professional supporting characters to the mix, while allowing the players to influence the story and its ending. As a result, live-action *jubenshas* became very similar to North American and North European blockbuster larps, and an important link in the Chinese entertainment industry chain.

## JUBENSHA 101

Online and offline *jubenshas* have a very similar process. You can buy tabletop murder mystery gamesto play at home.

Most of the scripts are about a murder, but other genres like espionage, survival, and rom-com are slowly gaining ground. The players choose (or are assigned) a character with a detailed background. The studios and the app's AR features usually provide authentic costumes. A Game Master facilitates the experience.

A *jubensha* usually involves three player roles: suspects, detectives and real murderers, with possible accomplices. Some complex scripts even have a mastermind behind the plot.

- ★ Innocent suspects need to clear themselves and complete their own sidequests;
- ★ Detectives must investigate the case and find the murderer;
- ★ Murderers must find a scapegoat and plant suspicion to escape the detectives.

The game usually contains two rounds of detecting. Players can search the crime scenes looking for hidden clues, then exchange information and discuss the mystery during a roundtable meeting. Finally, they vote on who is the murderer and conclude the game.



There's a wide variety of commercial larp venues in China. Photo: Xiong Shuo

	2016	2019	2021
Number of studios	2000+	12000+	30000+
Industry	?	1.5+ billion USD	2.5+ billion USD

The *jubensha* industry supports 2000+ script writers.



# LARP IN CHINA

- ★ Shuo's previous survey of 292 players showed a balanced gender ratio and 83.3% of bachelor's degrees or above.
- ★ The quality of scripts on the market is quite uneven, and intellectual property rights are often ignored.
- ★ Some designers theorize that the majority of players still prefer simple murder mystery games and escape rooms to complex *jubenshas* because most people feel safe knowing that there is an answer and a disclosure. Freeform roleplaying is too social and too uncertain.
- ★ Chinese companies started to use pervasive games not just for teambuilding, but for HR assessment and leadership development purposes.
- ★ In 2022, state regulations on content of scripts appeared.
- ★ Ruoyu predicts a renewed interest in pervasive games when AR/VR technologies and metaverses reach the next technological level.

## ADVANCED FORM

A quite complex, larp-like *jubensha* that **Wen Ruoyu** experienced in Wuhan was themed after *Dying Light*, a famous video game about post-apocalyptic survival. The game site was set into a two-storey mini town, where every player character had different main storyline missions.

During 'daytime', players could walk around the town and get quests from supporting characters who would give water and food in return. These resources were recorded on smartphones and without them your character would die. During 'nighttime,' players had to hide in houses to avoid zombies.

Just like in other open-world games, the players could chat freely and interact with each other and the NPCs. The immersive environment (uniforms, sound effect, supporting character actors, and scenery) made it a high-fidelity game experience.

## FROM 'ACQUAINTANCE' TO 'STRANGER ENTERTAINMENT'

On the surface, *jubenshas* are task-oriented. Solving the case is the core experience of the game. However, many play murder mystery games for social purposes.

Socialization in China was traditionally limited to acquaintances. Stranger socialization also relied on mutual acquaintances. However, social attitudes are changing among China's youth. Anonymous social apps like TanTan (Chinese Tinder) made online stranger socialization more acceptable, and this had a profound effect on pervasive games.

Ten years ago, people only played escape rooms with their friends. They had to invite 6-8 of them to play. It was an obstacle. Today, apps and organizers bring together prospective players who don't know each other. Pervasive games are an efficient and unembarrassing way for

young people to meet, socialize and find common topics. The temporary set of social relationships and the dark and scary atmosphere helps to create trust between strangers, meanwhile the alibi provided by playing a character allows for safe ways to experiment with your behavior. □



Atmospheric candles.  
Photo: Jingyu

## A RECIPE

Immerse the following ingredients in a simmering pot of Chinese culture for a few years:

- ★ Gong'an (or other Chinese crime genres)
- ★ Death Wears White (or other murder mystery boardgames)
- ★ Period dramas
- ★ Werewolf (or other social deduction games)
- ★ Escape rooms
- ★ Hanfu fashion
- ★ TV reality shows
- ★ Roleplaying



Toasting the dead.  
Photo: Jingyu

Many Chinese larps feature historical themes.  
Photo: Xiong Shuo



# TRIBES AND KINGDOMS

Text: Bálint Márk Túri & Mátyás Hartyándi

Special thanks: Zsolt Gerő, Ferenc Fábri, János Mácsai, Vilma Nádasdy, Ádám Hollós, György Mór Kárpáti, Csongor Szőke and Áron Hegymegi Kiss for the images and stories

**Larp has many antecedents in history, one of the most important being the old roleplay scene in Hungary. Let's take a look at some of that history, between 1909 and 1989!**

This article mentions historical cultural appropriation, racism and transphobia as well as totalitarian politics.

## HOMO LUDENS IN HUNGARY

Psst, we managed to eavesdrop on two international scholars discussing Hungarian roleplaying history!

**Dr. Expert:** I think that the various Hungarian roleplay traditions were often born out of necessity. They served as a mental survival strategy in the face of oppression. The Hungarian countryside functioned as a site of third-party resistance during the regimes of the 20th century. Intellectuals sought refuge and freedom there. The roles, rules, rituals, and narrative *frame games* transformed the participants into confidential insiders.

**Frame game (Keretjáték):** A Hungarian type of pervasive game where the activity functions as a narrative framework or extra layer around a longer and or more complex event. Playing the deductive *Werewolf* game during a conference or assuming fictional roles for a children's camp. In both cases, the frame game usually stays in superposition. It often remains ambiguous and implicit if someone acts within the game's magic circle or not.

**Ms. Professor:** This resulted in an incomprehensible argot for the authorities! A contemporary researcher, Áron Birtalan, once succinctly summarized this as: "There is something hyper-conservative but anarchic in play."

**Dr. Expert:** I find it interesting that although both the Bánk tradition and the Indian camps defined



A child dressed as an "Indian," 1938.  
Photo: Fortepan / Kurutz Márton



Number War, 1975.  
Photo: Fortepan / Faragó László



themselves in opposition to the Soviet-style Pioneer movement, they all used the same building block, *number wars* as a fundamental activity.

**Ms. Professor:** The movements we are discussing were sometimes tolerated, sometimes hidden, and sometimes opposed. But they all distanced themselves from official state power.

**Number War** (*Számháború*): One of the most popular Hungarian large-scale children’s games in the 20th century. Every participant wears a series of numbers on their forehead, usually written on paper. The player is defeated and eliminated from the game if an enemy can read out their numbers aloud. Variations exist, but Team Deathmatch and Capture the Flag versions are the default modes. The nature of the rules usually leads to hiding in the bush, boredom, rule-abusing, number guessing, and cheating. Influenced by boffer larps and the movie *Predator* (1987), a newer version in the late 90s moved toward asymmetrical warfare. It sets a smaller squad with very long number sequences against a bigger group.

**Dr. Expert:** I wonder how far back this counter-cultural attitude goes.

**Ms. Professor:** Its roots definitely existed in the various youth movements. After the Second World War, Gaudiopolis (‘City of Joy’) was a self-administrated children’s republic facilitated by the Lutheran pastor **Gábor Sztéhlo**. Meanwhile, the Bokor base community organized by the Piarist monk **György Bulányi** was a heterodox Catholic community on the edge of legality. These all had aspects that could be labeled as ‘Church anarchism.’



Field synagogue built by Vörösmarty 311 at the 4th World Scout Jamboree, 1933. Photo: Fortepan / Gödér Hajnal

**Dr. Expert:** Actually, the aforementioned elements are not national specialties. For example, the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift organization in England had similar vibes. Rituals, nicknames, secret codes, MilSim, and reenactment. It’s all there.

**Ms. Professor:** While these were common characteristics in the European scouting and other youth movements, Kibbo Kift shifted to the far right later on, contrary to the Hungarian trends.

**Dr. Expert:** This reminds me of the mostly Jewish 311th Vörösmarty Scout Troop, which was abolished three times during its short history. Those kids were brave!

**Ms. Professor:** They invented *hékli*, and created an improvised play, putting Cain on trial for murdering his brother, Abel - while the war crime trials of 1945 took place in Budapest!

**Hékli:** A prank special to the Vörösmarty 311 Scout Troop. The officers made the members believe that they were in mortal danger. This usually resulted in marching great distances with heavy gear, without food and water, sometimes at night, to a meeting point. It was a conscious way of preparing for the persecution of the Jews. Many members said that *hékli* helped them to survive.



The 4th World Scout Jamboree in Gödöllő, Hungary, 1933. Photo: Fortepan / Gödér Hajnal

**Dr. Expert:** Let’s dig even further back! As we all know, in the last years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, **Jabon Levy Moreno** started to develop psychodrama based on his experiences with improvisational roleplay in Vienna. That could be the very origin of European adult roleplaying!

**Ms. Professor:** I object! In 1919, Hungarian writer **Frigyes Karinthy** published a farcical game, *The Exam of The Archduke* on the pages of *Színházi Élet* (Theater Life) that critiqued the higher nobility.

**The Exam of The Archduke (summary)**

This examination differs from other ordinary ones. The Archduke can only pass the examination successfully; otherwise, the Professor will be fired.

1. The Professor must ask the Archduke a question that is impossible to answer wrong.
2. Then the Archduke must come up with the only possible answer that is wrong.
3. The Professor, to save his position, must declare that the answer is correct and explain why it was right.
4. The audience, as a jury, decides the outcome.

**Dr. Expert:** This particular sense of humor is typical of the Hungarian proto-larps throughout the different decades and regimes. Humor provides an outlet for frustration, a way of criticism and opposition in the context of oppressive regimes, where real resistance seems futile.



Ervin Baktay at his last Wild West Zree Meeting, 1957. Photo: Hegymegi Kiss Aron

**Ms. Professor:** It quite possibly started with the avant-garde and reform pedagogy movements...

**THE GODFATHER OF HUNGARIAN ROLEPLAYING**

Indologist **Ervin Baktay** was so obsessed with Native American culture that he served as chief of his fictional ‘Indian’ tribe for more than two decades.

**A Multifaceted Man**

On Wikipedia you can learn that

Baktay lived 1890-1963, was the uncle of the avant-garde artist **Amrita Sher-Gil**, and gave up his painting career to devote his life to Indian art and religion. As an Indologist, he translated the *Kama Sutra*, the *Mahābhārata*, and the *Ramayana* into Hungarian.

All this says nothing of the extraordinary private life Baktay led. In 1924, he and his friends founded the first Wild West Zree Meeting (WWZM), a proto-larp set in the saloon of the fictional town Loaferstown. This event was held repeatedly for 81 years! Later they established an ‘Indian’ tribe between



the World Wars. Baktay led this imitation Native American roleplay group for 24 years, and it remained active long after his departure.

Portrait of Ervin Baktay

Baktay’s oddities do not come out of nowhere. Records say that little Ervin dressed up to entertain older kids. As a young adult, he organized the first roleplay event for his artist collective in 1909. Symposiums, or as they called them, ‘orgies,’ were rather fashionable inthose times, but for Baktay and his circle, it was much more than partying in ancient tunics. They put extraordinary effort into sets, costumes, fictional characters

and performances. ‘When it comes to [role]playing, only the perfect solution can be accepted.’  
The spirit of playfulness did not leave him in the darkest times. As a soldier, he organized theater performances during the First World War. Baktay also held ironic Wild West Zree Meetings mocking the far right during the Second World War. His puns on politics are witty examples of reflective postmodernism.  
After a study tour in India (1926-1929), he and his friends set up the Danube Tribe in 1931. Longing for authentic experiences, inspired by the popular (fake) Native American literature of their time, they built a tent camp, took up names, and attempted to live like an indigenous

‘Indian’ community.  
The ‘tribe’ spent summers together, established semi-permanent camps on islands in the Danube Bend, and developed a complex system of amendments, customs, and rites. In 1955, an unknown group had already camped in what Baktay considered to be their own territory. Baktay took offense, and at the age of 65, he abruptly left and abandoned his own ‘tribe’. He mainly focused on South Asian studies in his last years, but the playful traditions Baktay started remained active until the 2000s.

TOPSY-TURVYTY!	← Puns on the word UNITY
Manifesto of the “Cowboy & Native American Racial Preservation Morguean”	← on morgue + organ/medium
The Spur-Cross Party of Arizona	← on right-wing cross symbolism

Examples of puns mocking the far right in a *Wild West Zree Meeting* invitation letter (January 1st, 1940).

Another ‘Indian Camp’

The composer, singer, and actor **Tamás Cseh** started an independent ‘Indian camp’ tradition by playing primarily competitive games in the forest with his friends, imitating Native Americans. They gathered a significant group. As this activity became more nuanced, they started to study authentic sources from the Ethnographic Museum to be more historically accurate. Later, they also met with the Danube Tribe and exchanged experiences.

From 1961 they camped near the village of Bakonybél for two weeks a summer, forming permanent ‘tribes’ and competing with each other. Cseh got the name ‘Smoke in the Eye.’ Their movement was illegal and a competitor to the compulsory socialist Pioneer Movement so they had to stay underground during the socialist era. However, the Cseh ‘Indian camp’ tradition is still alive in Hungary!

Short History of the Danube Tribe

The first Smaller Ojibwe or Danube Tribe camp started in 1931 with 15 participants, formed from Baktay’s best friends. The most hardcore attendees often spent their whole summer there. Their early golden age was the mid-30s. The tribe built a canoe fleet in 1936 and started experimenting with filming Native American -themed movies (most were lost but 50 recordings are still available from the era after 1956). In 1937 the group received international recognition and *The Algonquin Indian Council Club of Hungary* became an official member of the Indian Association of America. It should be noted that this wasn’t an actual Native American organization back then.



Baktay in character as the Big Chief on horseback, 1931. Photo: Source Bequest of Ervin Baktay, Hopp Ferenc Museum of East Asian Art, Itsz.\_Ad\_5756.8.1, Owner: Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest 2022





A symposium at Géza Blattner's studio, 1919-1924.  
Photo: Source Bequest of Ervin Baktay, Hopp Ferenc  
Museum of East Asian Art, Itsz. Ad\_5756.10.38.1,  
Owner: Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest 2022

After a hiatus between 1944 and 1947 because of the Second World War, the tribe witnessed its second golden age in the early Eastern Bloc era, now with second-generation members. Due to the constantly changing floodplain, they had to rebuild their camps several times, hopping from island to island. After the abrupt exit of Baktay, who used the name Lazy Buffalo, in 1955, the group still existed for nearly five decades, slowly losing steam. The last summer camp at the Danube was held in 2005. Living ex-members are now the residents of the nearby settlements.

With 64 full members in the tribe, including a lot of relatives in three generations, and an eight decade long tradition of complex roleplaying, the tradition initiated by Ervin Baktay could be considered as a pioneering

proto-larp in Europe. The members' roles did go beyond typical larp characters and could be considered personality-shaping alternative identities, similar to initiation names in various traditions. An ambivalent duality stems from the fact that in today's terms, their movement involved cultural appropriation, yet their acts were inspired by a deep identification with the oppressed natives of the Americas.

## PIPECLAND

### The Spell of Eszter Leveleki

Born to a father of Jewish origin and a mother from minor nobility, **Eszter Leveleki** obtained a school-teacher degree at the age of 21 and gained diverse experiences with different

progressive, pedagogical approaches.

In 1938, she started her summer vacation program for children at the lake-side town of Bánk with 18 children. Thus began Pipecland's 40 year history. It was a kingdom without a king - a reflection on the Hungarian reality of the 30s. With the exception of 1944, when the war and the Holocaust raged in the country, Leveleki organised the summer vacations until 1978.

Many children who took part in the summer vacations at Bánk had Jewish ancestry. Many of the Vörösmarty scouts spent part of their summer in Bánk as well. The laws of 1941 would have prevented the vacation, as no one with Jewish origin would have been allowed to stay at the premises at Bánk. However, Leveleki managed to get a

warrant from the local judge stating that those antisemitic laws were not in effect in the case of her summer vacation program.

The soccer team of Karancslapujtő, a village near Bánk, was the very last one on the chart of the 3rd county league, until the children on vacation at Bánk started rooting for them. According to legend, this act of solidarity boosted the team's morale so much that they won match after match and rose to the 1st league.

for a couple of hours by older children. These supporting characters propelled the story. The resolution of these conflicts, the big battles between sides were always fought in the form of number wars. However, sometimes the enemies did not follow the rules to have a greater dramatic impact on the children.

The stories were usually premeditated by Leveleki and the older room chieftains. Still, it left some space for the children to theorize upon their



### Toward Roleplaying

The influence of the scout movement was strong in the beginning. Early gameplay at Bánk was very brutal, focusing on physical activities rather than genuine narratives. This had to do with the penetrating nature of the war and post-war reality.

Later, more defined roles appeared. 'The enemies' were usually played

experiences and those theories were partially integrated into the later stages of the story.

In the '60s and the '70s arts and culture gained a greater emphasis in Bánk, largely due to the rise of a new cultural elite at the time. Their children showed a greater interest in these intellectual topics, along which the narratives of the play became more complex.

Who fled the flood? A drawing by Grey Hawks depicting Strong Wolf, 1949.  
Photo: Source Bequest of Ervin Baktay, Hopp Ferenc Museum of East Asian Art, Itsz. Ad\_5895.1.2-2013, Owner: Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest 2022



After Pipecland ended, many of the former children tried to fill in this empty space, creating their own vacation programs. Nowadays there are around 20 summer camps continuing Bánk’s legacy.

# SUMMARY

## RING CAMPS

**Péter Rákos** and **János Mácsai**, who spent the summers of their childhoods at Bánk, decided to create their own camp.

### The Middle Ages Camp

The first step towards Ring Camps was the Middle Ages Camp of Hejce in 1985. While they kept the core ideas of the Bánk tradition, they placed this realm into the mythological middle ages, influenced by Arthurian legends. The figure of Sir Urre of Hungary served as a meta-fictional connection to the fabulous king of the Brits.

In the camp the children went through knightng ceremonies, rode horses, threw javelins and created renaissance faire costumes. All these quasi-re-enactments were considered quite subversive in Hungary at the

time, especially being associated with the identity-forming tales of western imperialism.

### The Kingdom of Dombudvard

After moving the camp to Köveskál in 1988, Péter Rákos wanted to add more complex, board game-like rules to the game to allow character death. If someone’s character died, they had to spend the next 24 hours on their bed in complete silence.

**Ring Duels:** Every citizen wears (at least) one ring on their neck that symbolizes their life. While weapons have one or more attack rings, shields and armor provide defense rings.

The attacker has to touch the defender and shout “Touch.” They turn their backs to each other. The attacker places their attack rings onto their fingers. The defender has to guess the position of the attacker’s rings and place their rings accordingly. They turn around and compare the results. For every unmatched ring the defender loses one life, one ring. Then the defender can return the attack or disengage from the duel.

## The Alliance of The Known Realms

Former members of Dombudvard created their own Ring Camps, and their heirs created their own. Nowadays there are 15 fantasy kingdoms in the Ring Camp tradition.



The Danube scene re-enacted other scenarios too, apart from Native American ones. Pirates on the ship called Plague, 1930. Photo: Source Bequest of Ervin Baktay, Hopp Ferenc Museum of East Asian Art, Itsz. F2018.1, Owner: Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest 2022

# THE BÁNK TRADITION

Defining characteristics of the Bánk vacations:

- \* 3 weeks long - sufficient time away from the family to have a transformative experience
- \* Frame games - being citizens of and holding positions in the fictional country of Pipecland
- \* No complex roles, but participants were present through a kind of ‘fictitious I’ enforced by the nicknames used almost exclusively within the community.

Tradition	Baktay	Bánk	Ring Camps
Active Years	1924-2005	1938-	1988-
Role	Complex alter egos	Fictitious “I”  Functions in the fictional kingdom	Complex character in a fantasy realm
Story	Continuous second life during	Frame games  Building a tradition	Continuous  Fantasy setting
Game Mechanics	-	Number War	Ring Duel



# LEADING WITH LARP MAGIC

Text: Moa Rönnåsen

**To write larps  
and invite  
people to  
take part in  
your story  
is to be a  
leader.**

It's a responsibility and a privilege to make people part of your vision. It requires a flexible mindset and a good understanding of how to make people engage to make people feel included and safe enough to open up to real collaboration. As a larper you have the opportunity to use the strengths you've learned in this amazing community in your role as a leader.

A lot of what I do in my professional role I've learned in the larp community. I've worked with building and leading teams towards a common vision for almost 15 years and been a part of the larp community, as a participant and creator, for a good part of three decades. It's interesting to distill what I've learned in the community and how I can use that as an organizer or leader in other contexts.

So, what is it that we do so well? I'm gonna tell you the big secret right away: **It's about making collaboration possible by creating the prerequisites for successful human interactions.**

For me, the key to any great creative outcome, no matter if it's a larp or a new software feature, is people collaborating towards a common goal. To get people to invest their time, effort and feelings in a project isn't easy, but it's the most powerful tool in making awesome

stuff. Larping is in itself built on the mechanics of engagement. When I've drilled down on that idea, I have found three key things about how we do it in the larp community that you can use with intent to make successful interaction and collaboration possible in any context.

- ★ Build your magic circle to help people engage and collaborate.
- ★ Be transparent and help people feel safe with where you're going.
- ★ Help people lift each other and play to each other's strengths.

When you use these keys you have the possibility to build something unique and very powerful. In a team we might call it flow, in a larp it might be that elusive thing we call larp magic.

## **HELP PEOPLE ENGAGE - BUILD YOUR MAGIC CIRCLE**

The more people there are who care about a project, the better. It will make your life, and the execution of your vision, easier if the people around you care as much as you do. **Build a community around your idea, build your magic circle.**

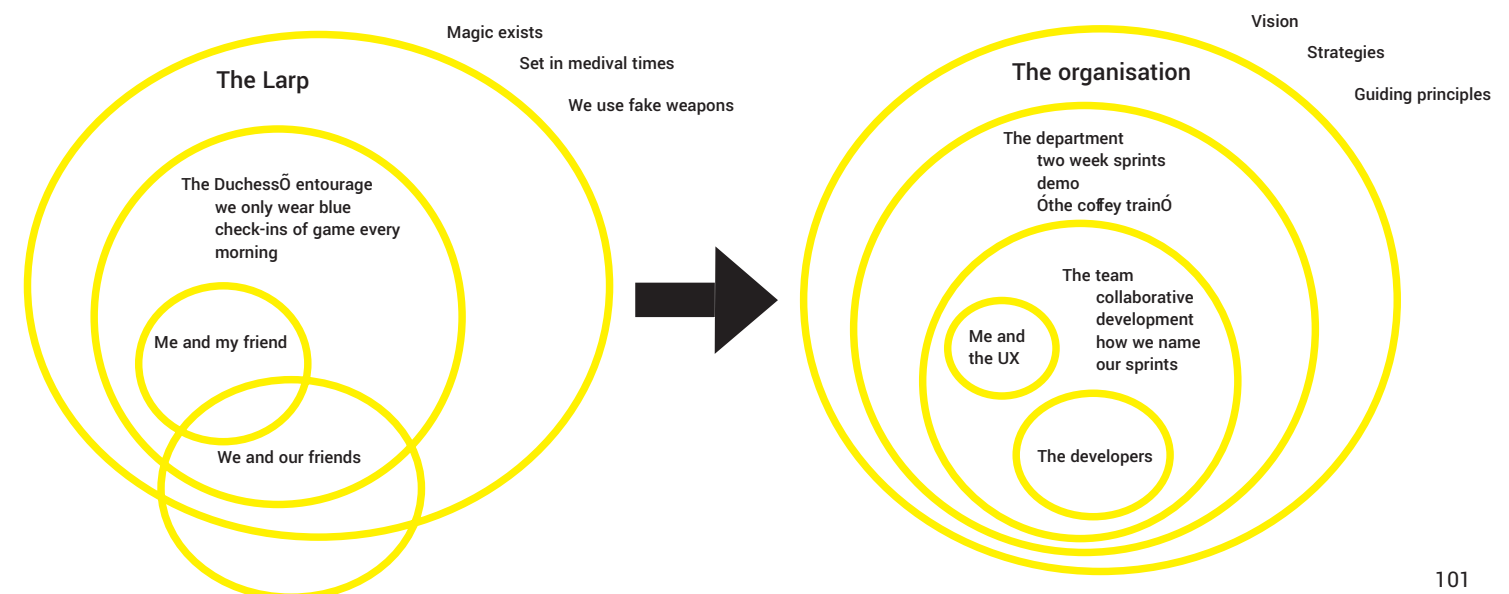
The idea of magic circles comes from play theory and basically

means to create the framework in which we can collaborate, to build an arena in which we meet on the same terms.

The magic circle is created by a set of rules and to be able to participate you have to agree to those rules. Larps in themselves are magic circles and the rules guide the setting we're in and how that fictional world works. Putting people together in a group doesn't make a magic circle by itself. You create the magic circle by getting the people invested in the group, co-creating what is important, how they interact and what makes this particular group a "we." Both the rules guiding how we interact and work together, and the small, unofficial things that make us feel like a unique unit, are part of that "we."

Large magic circles must have more clearly stated rules, vision and strategy to function well. A larp has a setting and rules that govern its world. Done right, an organization might work as a large magic circle. In those large circles there is the possibility of a multitude of smaller circles, and you can be part of several magic circles at the same time. To keep a magic circle alive over time you have to put routines in place that work as a reminder of the rules and why this group of people has a common purpose.

Graph 1: Magic circles makes a "we" out of a group of people.

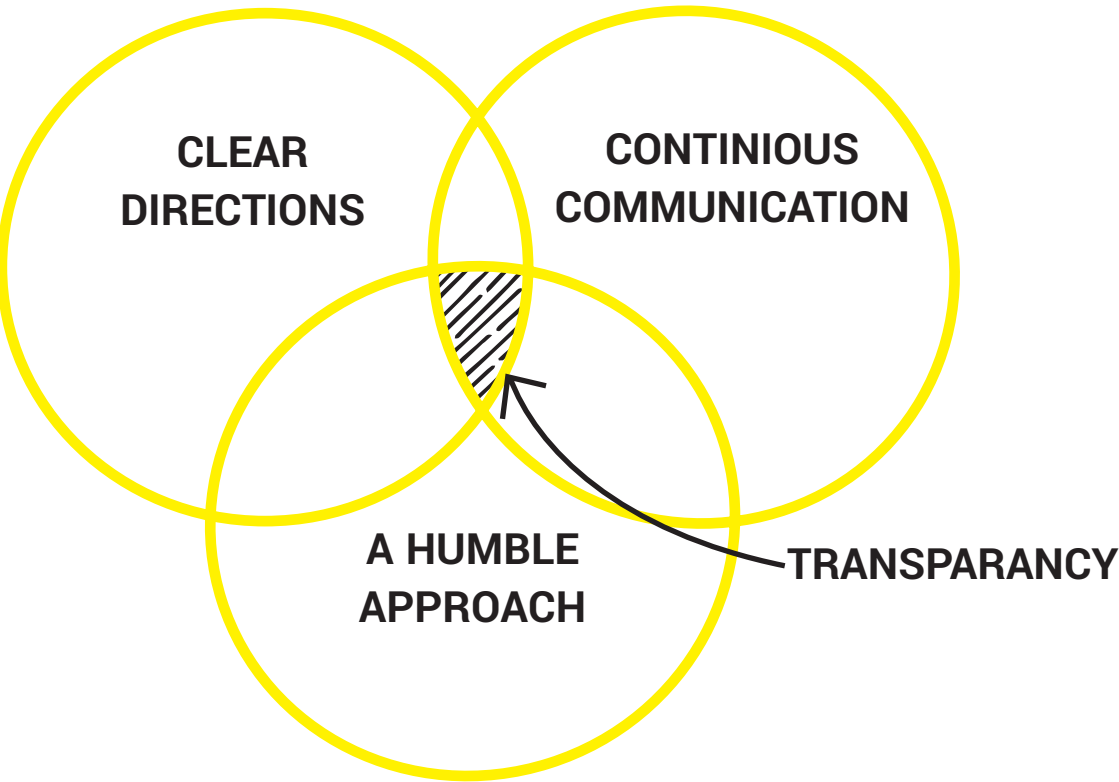




**BUILD AND MAINTAIN YOUR MAGIC CIRCLE:**

- ★ Work together on the vision and the guiding star of your project. Look at the vision from different angles and try the idea from different perspectives. This will allow the team to get to know, shape, and feel invested in the vision and make it part of your magic circle.
- ★ Run a workshop (or several) to create consensus in the team about what’s important to make your collaboration work. Look at formal rules that you want to follow, like the way you want to check in, communicate and share progress. If you have worked together for a while you might also make a map of the things that bind you together, the unspoken things that create a “we” out of the group.
- ★ Continuously revisit the conditions of your circle. Schedule time to look at your rules and ask yourself “are we living by this?” If not, what do we have to change to make it work better?

Graph 2: Transparency is the result of a number of behaviors that coincides.



- ★ Talk about how you foster security in the team. For example, how do you handle mistakes and failures? How does the group pick up and help each other forward? Make this part of the rules in your circle.
- ★ Have fun together! The best projects are created by people having fun doing it.

**HELP PEOPLE FEEL SAFE – TRANSPARENCY**

For people to be able to step into and co-own a project or product, they have to feel secure with where we’re going. **Uncertainty is the death of collaboration.** The best way to help people care about a vision, and feel safe with it, is to invite them in to share the vision with you.

In the larp community we talk about levels of transparency, and people have different preferences. To be able to collaborate you have to know that you share an understanding of what you are doing.

That you are aiming at the same goal. Otherwise the risk is high that you will be going in different directions.

In a larp context this might entail having a super clear dramaturgical curve where everyone knows how the ending will be. From a player perspective, a high level of transparency is important even in the least transparent larp designs. In every scene you have to show your intent, where you are going and why, to make it possible for your co-larpers to buy into your idea and help you play it out.

**THINGS THAT HELP US BE TRANSPARENT**

- ★ Impact maps - work together with your team to define the goal, the impact you’re looking for and how you get there.
- ★ Visualization - keep eyes on the prize by having the vision and goal in plain sight. Write it on a wall, name your chat with your vision or print it on t-shirts!
- ★ As a leader, be open with decisions that affect the team and the team’s work.

- ★ Make space for people to talk about fears, obstacles and difficulties and how we can address them to make positive change.

**HELP PEOPLE BE AWESOME – PLAY TO LIFT**

To succeed with collaboration, during a scene or when building something cool together, help each other be as awesome as possible. Focus on the common achievement instead of the individual.



Graph 3: How to play to lift others.

**“Play to lift” is a common concept in the larp world, but do it in your everyday life and you might reach unexpected heights!**

Interaction and co-creation is about giving and taking. It is about giving space and making space for each other’s skills and roles and helping each other to succeed as well as possible. There is something un-dramatizing in focusing on lifting others instead of focusing on oneself. It becomes not about my own achievement but about helping my co-players or teammates shine. So, play to lift works both as a way to relax and let go of your own performance anxiety, and to work together to find and highlight the most interesting and important aspects in the roles played or the project you create.

**HOW WE PLAY TO LIFT**

- ★ Give space to the expert and ask others for insights, knowledge and participation.
- ★ Work with teams with different competencies and make the most of that by inviting different competencies into all parts of the

process.

- ★ Make it a part of your routine to acknowledge each other’s work, input and achievements.
- ★ A method is only as good as how it works for the people using it. Make sure your methods are useful by choosing them with care, focusing on the outcome you want. Adapt the method to your needs.
- ★ Evaluate your process continuously - ask yourself what went well and what we can improve.
- ★ Ask for help! Use others’ awesomeness when you’re stuck.

**THE GOAL**

So what’s the end goal? The most immediate answer is co-ownership, not only for the creative outcome and experience but also in terms of responsibility. When people feel responsibility for the outcome they tend to make an effort to make things move along and pitch in when things go south instead of sitting back and complaining.

The second benefit is engagement. Helping people go from passive on-lookers to active

participants, nudging them to help create momentum instead of waiting for someone else to start something.

And third, a common feeling of wanting the best for each other. A friendly environment where it’s okay to mess up because your friends will pick you up and help you along and you will do the same for them.

To lead is both to invite collaboration and to give a clear direction. Using these techniques that you know from larp to help people care, engage and lift each other helps you do just that. And as an extra plus, your vision will probably turn out even more awesome than you imagined! □



# WIELDING THE MAGIC OF ANTICIPATION

Text: Olivia Fischer  
Illustration: Nina Mutik

**Maximizing  
the emotional  
impact of  
anticipation  
for better play**



## "I SEE YOU SHIVER WITH ANTICIPATION"

- Rocky Horror Picture Show

The sweet moment when you close your eyes full of expectation while your lips get closer and closer to another person's lips for the first time. So close that you can already feel their breath caressing your cheek... when you can sense the warmth of their body close to yours. This seemingly endless moment when your heart starts beating a tiny bit faster and when you do not yet know if your and the other's lips are really going to touch.

Isn't this moment of sweet anticipation often more intense than the kiss itself?

Or the last moments of a desperate bunch of rebels before the attack of an overpowering group of stormtroopers. Waiting to stand their ground for the last time and defend their base with their lives. The last glimpses they might exchange, someone patting a friend on the shoulder. Fear and hope in conflict with each other. Final encouraging words by a leader.

Isn't this moment of gloomy, yet heroic anticipation much more interesting than the following fight?

Is it not those moments when events are yet to happen that spark our excitement and that send our emotions on a rollercoaster ride? No matter whether can foresee the outcome or not, these moments of anticipation hold a bewitching power.

Skillful authors use these moments to build up suspense in their novels and also to forge a stronger bond between you, the reader, and the novel's characters. Screenwriters use them to hook you

to their shows and movies while displaying their characters' virtues and flaws. Some of us larp folk instinctively use moments of anticipation to develop intense scenes during larps. However, not all larpers and larp designers are aware of the magic of anticipation, let alone of how to wield this magic. So let us quickly look at one or two things that you can do to start using the magic of anticipation to enhance your own experience as a player.

### FIRST - AND THIS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT RULE OF ALL - DON'T RUSH TO THE ANTICIPATED EVENT!

Learn to relish moments of anticipation. Like in the first example with the kiss, you might be eager to take the next step in a chain of events. Maybe you feel like you cannot wait until the anticipated event is going to happen but learn to endure this suspense! Dive into this sweet kind of excitement in order to fully unlock its potential.

### SECOND, USE THOSE MOMENTS TO DELVE INTO YOUR CHARACTER'S UNIQUE PERSONALITY!

Use the moment of anticipation to dive even deeper into your characters' hopes and fears. In these

moments the anticipated event is like Schroedinger's cat. Every outcome is possible which allows you to portray and experience different aspects of your character's personality. Imagine the worst possible thing to happen and let your character react to it! Or let your character dream of the best possible outcome and share it with somebody to play on hope! Maybe old memories from your background story surface or maybe something that happened earlier during the larp acquires new gravitas.

### THIRD, LET YOUR EMOTIONS FLOW!

Moments of anticipation are often moments when emotional waves become massive, when feelings can't be held back anymore. Use your whole body to feel and portray those emotions. This might be a shivering breath before you kiss or shakily grasping your best friend's hand before you storm out into battle. It might be a

long thankful smile at your mentor before you climb the stage to hold a speech.

### FOURTH, FOCUS ON YOUR CO-PLAYERS TOO!

As we all know, larp is a co-creative medium and we all want to have a good experience when playing. So try to find a good balance between exploring your character during moments of anticipation and giving the floor to other players. Those moments of anticipation are a perfect opportunity to learn more about

others' characters and to develop your character's relationship to them further. You can also use the things you learn from such moments about others' characters later in the game to create intense personal scenes.

### NOW, LET'S BRIEFLY TAKE THE DESIGNER'S PERSPECTIVE.

If your larp is a complete sandbox, you probably don't have much influence over moments of anticipation. However, if you have at least some rough cornerstone events planned for your larp, then you should definitely add enough occasions and time for your players to savor the anticipation.

Of course, sudden surprises and unexpected turns of events have their own magical charm but don't forget to add opportunities of anticipation. Let your players wait before

a big event is finally happening and give them hints about what they can expect to spark the flame of their imagination. You can drop allusions with the help of supporting characters or in-game materials such as a newspaper. Or you can simply use transparent design where your players know off-game where the story arc is going.

The imagination of your players is a powerful tool! Just think of a horror movie as an

example - usually, we are far more frightened when we haven't seen the monster. When we know that there is something lurking, some eerie imminence, our imagination fills in the gaps and often our imagination does it far more effectively than any creature designer.

Give your players time to envision the worst or the best before you actually let it happen. If you want, you can even guide their imagination by using sound effects, music, lighting, and so on. Just read up on how to use those things when designing larps to get some inspiration. A good starting point is the article "The Fundamentals of Sound Design in Larp" by Anni Tolvanen and Irrette Melakoski published in the book *Larp Design*.

No matter if you look at anticipation from a player's perspective or from a designer's - relishing moments of anticipation can definitely create intense scenes. Let's all be more aware of the magic that lies within anticipation and let's use it more consciously! □



# HOW TO MANAGE A LARP PROJECT?

Text: Sandy Bailly

**There are loads of tips and tricks, dos and don'ts for efficient larp production, and sometimes you just don't see the wood for the trees anymore. So how about a non-exhaustive checklist covering a few key components of larp production, kindly offered to you by Your Friendly Neighborhood Project Manager.™**

## COMMUNICATION DOS AND DON'TS

- ★ Have all of your emails written beforehand.
- ★ Emails arriving in people's primary inbox trumps design aesthetics. > Think about whether you really need to use that mailing tool.
- ★ Crosspost every email on social media channels. > **Is your email too long for social media posts? Then it's maybe also too long for people to read.**
- ★ Don't put key information behind another click after people opened your email. **The fewer actions needed, the better.**
- ★ **Limit the number of important points or actions you communicate in one message.** Otherwise, no one will carry them all out. (Five actions is a lot, three is barely okay.)
- ★ Keep your communication clear and simple.
- ★ Use formatting to highlight the key info and action points.
- ★ Use bullet points and numbers for differentiating between different actions and information
- ★ Be consistent in the use of titles for your emails. For example: "Title of larp - casting, what's next & pre-game calibration," or "title of larp - payment details."
- ★ Communicate your deadlines clearly and stick to them.
- ★ If you can't stick to your deadlines, communicate clearly and honestly about why.
- ★ **Apologize if you mess up.**
- ★ **Be consistent:** in your tone of voice, style, and design. For example, keep repeating the same visual elements, use the same emojis in social media posts and always use the same formula to end your emails.

## HOW TO KEEP YOUR CREW HAPPY

- ★ Recognise them for what they're good at.
- ★ **Give them room for failure and be forgiving when they cock up.**
- ★ Give your crew the opportunity to opt in to tasks. Opting out of something is more difficult than opting in enthusiastically to something they like, or want to get better at.
- ★ **Trust your crew,** and dare to ask them for help. You will receive the same trust in return. As a consequence: be open and understanding when they ask for help and trust, too.
- ★ Don't be afraid to ask your crew for their opinion: They want to be part of your project and want to make it succeed, so make them wholly part of the result, and they will help you make it better.
- ★ **Thank them regularly and sincerely for the work they do.**
- ★ **Be clear and upfront about your expectations** from your crew. If anything changes (for example, added tasks), communicate about it.



## CREATING A GOOD ONLINE MEETING CULTURE

- \* Have an agenda for each meeting, which you state at the start of the meeting.
- \* Ask people to write down their questions or remarks while you talk, so you don't have constant interruptions or digressions during the meeting.
- \* Practice your meetings beforehand, out loud (ideally).
- \* Try to limit what you say to about 30 minutes.
- \* Keep the content very structured and easy to follow - people can ask more details afterwards if they need it, so stick to key information.
- \* Open the floor at the end for your crew, and do this in a structured way (raising hands for remarks and taking turns speaking).
- \* Make a list of tasks you need help with, and have an agenda item in which you briefly run through the tasks and ask your crew who wants to help with what (this also gives you a good division of responsibilities).
- \* Communicate the tasks you agreed on during the meeting in writing afterwards
- \* Have online meetings last a maximum of one hour. If the meeting finishes early, people can have space to just socialize. If there's risk of lasting longer: cut less important points out. Some things can be an email. Some things can be discussed in the next meeting. Some things will get solved in the meantime.

## BACKPLANNING MAGIC

Here's some info if you want to read up on what backplanning is and why it is so useful for project management:

**What is Backplanning?** As the name suggests, backplanning is the process of planning backwards. This means you start a plan at the end goal and then work to the required steps to get there in reverse chronological order. Basically, it means you plan from Z to A.

**Why would I do this?** Backplanning helps in developing more realistic plans and in making it more likely the required deadline will be met.

If you take care to first plan the main tasks as well as the ones with a very fixed deadline, you can then throw in the smaller tasks and shuffle the work around as you go, in function of the project. So essentially, having a good backplanning gives you more room for flexibility and for failure.

**Need some tools?** There's a ton of them available, often even for free! Some nice ones are Trello, Jira, Miro and Asana, and they're only an online search away!.

**Plan plenty of time to fail.** you can be a lot more relaxed about team members missing deadlines if you have already calculated this into your planning.

(I tend to work with three different deadlines: Ideal - really good - still doable.)

**Unsure of how much time each task or part of your planning will take?** Think of how much time you would allow yourself, and add at least half of that (depending on how hard you are on yourself) to the time needed.

For each task, think about how important they are, and how much they can be moved around within the actual planning. Basically: **assign priorities, importance and urgency, and determine flexibility.**

## ELEMENTS FOR BUILDING A SOLID FRAMEWORK

In this context, framework means all the practical and creative design decisions that go into the production of your larp. The framework of the larp is the space and the limits to that space which you create through your design, and it's the world in which your participants can move and exist freely.

**Important! > If your framework is well defined, there's a lot of room and confidence to move freely within that framework**

**Basically: expectation management happens here!**

- \* Design document.
- \* **Emotional safety tools.**
- \* Code of conduct.
- \* Setting and background description.
- \* Costume guide.
- \* **Guides for specific elements in a larp (for example, how to play on the existing books in a larp based on a book, how to play on historical fidelity in a historical larp, etc.)**
- \* List of important dates.
- \* **Contact details for getting in touch with the organization (via social media, email, personal channels, ...?)**
- \* Communication about prices, and whether sponsored or free tickets will be an option.
- \* Diegetic and non-diegetic rules (an example from online games is in-game techniques for dealing with certain realities of online larp, like the use of 'logging out' for going offline and away from the game for a while).
- \* Larp schedule.
- \* Pre-game calibration - communicating about whether and how it will happen.
- \* Workshops, and communicating them in your schedule.
- \* Calibration during the game - when and how.
- \* Contingency plans - having them ready (for example, knowing how you will deal with dropouts during an online game).

# THE FUTURE IS STRAIGHT

A Nordic larp about gay conversion therapy set in a retro sci-fi setting



**BECOME NATURAL AGAIN**  
Next run in Norway near Oslo in the early fall of 2024

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# UNCOMFORTABLE METALINGUISTICS

Text: Thomaz Barbeiro and Leandro Godoy  
Photos: Thomaz Barbeiro

**Clinging to the elegant life tooth and nail.**



Lack of hope, the inertia of routine, extreme concern with the hygiene of surfaces, panic over a virus caught in the air and disseminating false information: This was the social context when the game *Vida elegante* (*The Elegant Life*, organized by Confraria das Ideias) took place. This context led us to create larp as caricatured metaphor to provoke reflection.

The plot unfolds during an “elegant dinner” for the survivors of the Cunha Mattos family, amid social and health-related chaos after ten years of quarantine, to celebrate the birthday of their already dysfunctional patriarch.

They try to maintain the refinements of an elegant life, living with moral scandals, unresolved lies and reprehensible attitudes that are increasingly difficult to hide.

The larp took place in December 2020, with great anguish due to the uncertainties of the pandemic. In the game, the imposition of accessories such as heavy masks, goggles and heavy clothes limited speech, breathing and movements, acting as a mobilizing aspect and a mechanic of the “superlative”. The emerging particular atmosphere provokes an intense and distressing experience intended to reflect the period of physical and emotional restrictions we were experiencing.



Frustration and hopelessness in the face of the impossibility of changing the reality around them. Feelings experienced by the characters and very common to everyone playing at that moment of the pandemic.



Indispensable in the context of a lethal infection, the game's accessories provoke a realistic and suffocating sensory experience.

The striking presence of the mask expresses different meanings between play and reality, between the intimate and the manifest. It explores a strong symbolic element, that of the persona constructed by each social subject. The characters face the ruin of their image, their contradictions and the repugnant aspects of their personality while using strategies of manipulation to maintain an image of power and exemplary morality within the standards of civility.

Protection and survival equipment within the plot can be understood as social markers. In this dystopia it is clear that there are no heroes, miraculous explanation or geographical determination to indicate who are the most affected.

Those who survive are those who have the economic conditions to acquire the necessary equipment and isolate themselves in a house with a stock of supplies at their disposal.

The Cunha Mattos family represents these survivors.

By toasting with an expensive drink, they represent this society that wastes resources while hiding its ills, without worrying about the outside world.

Today we are those survivors. What will we do from now on? □



Pregnant and victim of sexual abuse silenced by her family, she expressed her feelings through music, like a lament.



Top: The Cunha Matos family, hiding behind physical and metaphorical masks, while trying to disguise despair, trauma and lies during a supposedly elegant dinner.

Middle: Because of the contaminated air, the heavy masks couldn't be removed, so characters could only be fed via an IV drip. Players pretended to apply the serum to their arms.

Left: The toasts were merely figurative: Here, they toasted in memory of the patriarch and also to waste, throwing away the contents of the drink that they cannot drink because of the masks.



# "NEVER GIVE UP, NEVER SURRENDER"

Text: Inge-Mette Petersen

## Or why Galaxy Quest is the perfect larp.

In 1999, just before the millennium, the movie *Galaxy Quest* was released. In the movie, you follow a group of actors as they try to save the world of the Thermians by becoming the heroes they were in the TV show *Galaxy Quest*. But there is a caveat to this – when the Thermians saw the show, they thought they were watching a documentary, and they recreated everything from the spacecraft to the uniforms.

So, try to put yourself in the mind and body of the clueless actor: You are transported eight lightyears into space and are now on a working space craft, the Protector II. So how do you become the hero of the story, when you know absolutely nothing about how to fly a spacecraft or

negotiate with an alien enemy?

When you larp you are often expected to do just that. But what can help you as a player to enter that space in your mind where everything becomes real? Is it the design, the space, the scenography – or something else entirely? To answer this question, I talked to Esperanza Montero of NotOnlyLarp, and player/designer, Sandy Bailly.

I first met Esperanza Montero in 2018, when I played her *Westworld*-inspired larp *Conscience* in Fort Bravo, Almeria, Spain. *Conscience* is a large sprawling monster. Montero called it five larps in one with layers of reality that can be switched by a few select players, who play the plot writers that make the stories wanted by the guests happen. Playing an android host, the powerless doll in their plot, you are totally at their mercy. *Conscience* deals with the consequences of the choices you make on a political, moral and ethical level, something that interests me. This is not a coincidence as Montero has a long experience as an LGBT activist and Pride organizer.

The next year, 2019, I went to Matera in Italy to play *The Trial of the Shadowcasters*, an urban larp by Bjarke Petersen and Mike Pohjola dealing with history and philosophy.

Matera is a very special place, partly a cave city, so the scenography was a big part of the larp. I played with Sandy Bailly there in the caves and on the streets. I talked to her about the importance of locations for the players, and she had some interesting thoughts about this.

Both Fort Bravo and Matera are fascinating locations. But the perfect location does not exist. A larp can be built around a location or the location can be adopted to fit the larp design. The location and scenography can help the story and the players. A castle with lots of nooks and crannies is perfect for larps with a lot of secrets and politics. A small room for meetings is great for building up tension. And as Bailly says - it is great to have a space where you can see the world go by as your character. I have certainly done that.

The location is not enough, no matter how magical it is. A designer needs collaborators - prop makers, character writers and safety personnel. They need the organization for logistics and production, for catering and administration. They need supporting characters to help move the story along. And they need to make the players understand the vision and the ideas behind the larp before they arrive on the scene. Then the larp starts, the players arrive –

and all the plans of the organizers change. Bailly interprets larp as a framework for co-creation. If it is clear and well defined you can let people loose in it, so they can move around in it much more freely and securely.

Montero has a similar definition - larp is a collaborative art form where you all have a story to tell together. The players always have the power. The moment they get their character they start to make backstories, playlists, costumes, and relations. All that will also be part of the final game. But when the location, the design and the vision, and the characters as they are portrayed by the players all converge, larp magic happens. You truly believe in the story you are telling together.

And then the larp ends – or does it? For an organizer like Montero there is important work to do after the larp. Every aspect must be evaluated, the persons who have helped in realizing the project must be credited and the experience gained before, during and after must be collected. Maybe the organizer wants to reiterate it, to take the players on the journey again.

The larp has been documented by photographers that captures a fleeting moment in the game. This picture becomes part of the players' memory. Montero found it interesting how larp inspires creative people. She has seen essays, short stories, songs, comics and even videos done by players after the larp has ended, a testimony to how real the story has become to them. For some it has been a deep personal experience that has changed their outlook on life. For others it was a great rollercoaster ride. And when they meet again at a larp, a convention or a party, they will share

memories. Maybe a catchphrase ("By Grabthars Hammer....") or a ritual will be repeated. And why not - just as the actors in *Galaxy Quest* they have been on a journey together and survived.

And maybe you want to join them. If you do – may you live long and prosper. □



Inge-Mette Petersen at the larp *Demeter*.  
Photo: Larson Kasper



# THE LION, THE WITCH & THE WORKSHOP

Text: Olivia Fischer  
Illustration: Nina Mutik

**All shall be  
done but  
it may be  
harder than  
you think**

C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

Creating a pre-game workshop for your larp is an essential part of larp design. Like the wardrobe leading the Pevensie children into the magic land of Narnia, an efficient workshop is the pathway into a good larp experience.

Luckily, the larp world is full of well-thought-out workshops. Just choose one that worked well on another larp and you are good to go. End of story.

Or is it? Well, it is not that simple. However, fortunately there are some key points of instructional design that help you choose, adapt or create a workshop that can improve the players' experience at your larp.

## FIGURE OUT WHICH PREREQUISITES PLAYERS NEED IN ORDER TO HAVE A GOOD EXPERIENCE

Drawing from Bigg's theory of Constructive Alignment, I would say that the most important thing, when designing a workshop, is to know what you want players to do or experience at your larp. This might sound simple, but in fact it often is not. It is quite hard to figure out what people really need when they are in-game. It might be certain meta-techniques, in-game knowledge, player skills, etc.

Whatever it is, your workshop should be tailored to support people gaining this specific prerequisite. That one workshop that worked so perfectly well for you in the last larp you attended might not be the optimal choice because every larp has different requirements.

The following questions are intended to help you think about prerequisites that might (or might not) be crucial to your larp. Think of the experiences you want your players to have at your larp, of the scenes you want them to play and the atmosphere and mood you want them to feel.

Do players need certain prerequisites, such as techniques, skills or knowledge, in order to:

Feel safe?

Be brave?

Calibrate their experience with fellow players?

Navigate your larp?

Be able to steer and pace their experience?

Immerse themselves into the world you created?

Be able to portray their role?

Support others in the portrayal of their role

Bring the fictional world to life?

Get into character?

emotional prerequisites

larp flow prerequisites

portrayal prerequisites

kick-off prerequisites

Once you have identified the prerequisite(s), create a workshop in which people can gain and practice the exact tool, skill or knowledge. Be careful: often the true prerequisites are hard to pin down and you need a lot of time to figure them out.

Here's a few examples:

Portraying a subgroup - Most larps feature different in-game social groups. Let's say you want players to portray a tribe and you really want them to feel a sense of community and group identity. It will not be enough to have them stand in a circle, introduce themselves to each other and talk about their connections and family relationships. If your intended experience outcome is feeling the group identity, you can give them time to develop e.g. a greeting that is unique to their group and practice it. You can let them improvise a scene from the past, for example a

celebration and thereby give them a common memory.

Playing erotic scenes - Obviously players need to know safety techniques in order to navigate erotic scenes in larps. However, often players already know your chosen techniques so you might not need to spend so much time on practicing. If you want your players to play erotic scenes, trust and confidence are key ingredients. Create a workshop in which players have time to build up trust with their co-players.

Creating opportunities for conflict and fellowship - A beloved tool for this is the status line, in which players line up according to a specific attribute (from the richest to the poorest or from the best student to the rebellious slacker). Often status lines are done quickly, one after another, without time to let players work with the outcome of the status line.



Why not let people choose somebody from the other end of the line and give them a couple of minutes to figure out how they want to deal with that person in-game? Or why not divide the line into subgroups and let the subgroups create a common memory?

**ACCOMMODATE DIFFERENT LEARNING PREFERENCES**

People have different preferences when it comes to learning something new. Even if you plan to practice safety techniques intensely in a workshop, it might be more efficient for some of your players to receive a description of those techniques in written form or as a video file. Nobody says that a preparatory workshop can only be done right before a larp. It can also be done earlier and it might even be done asynchronously. Asynchronous learning means that you create a learning or practice opportunity in which people can learn on their own schedule (watching a video about calibration techniques or having a group of players in an online meeting working through preparatory tasks provided by you). It can be helpful for people to offer information in different styles (written, audio, visual). You could let people choose how they learn something best, which might mean that some people prefer to watch a workshop instead of actively participating.

**USE CLEAR, SIMPLE LANGUAGE AND BE ORGANIZED**

No matter whether you lead a workshop in your participants' native language or not, use simple sentences and words. Try to shape clear and well organized instructions. Use a cheat sheet in

order to maintain your well-thought-out structure of the workshop and the accompanying instructions. Keep an eye on the time and stick to your schedule.

**GIVE PEOPLE TIME AND DIFFERENT OPPORTUNITIES TO PRACTICE NECESSARY SKILLS FOR THE LARP**

People need time to rehearse and practice. If you want your players to play a military unit, let them practice how to move as a group and how to greet people of different ranks. If a specific meta-technique is crucial for your larp, let people practice it in different settings and with different partners.

**STICK TO COMMONLY KNOWN SAFETY TOOLS WHENEVER POSSIBLE**

Try not to invent something new for every larp when it comes to safety techniques or safe words used to de-escalate or stop a scene. Your players need to be able to use safety techniques in emotionally or cognitively challenging moments so they need something they have practiced a lot. Ideally this is something they have used at other larps and which they have automatized.

It might seem appealing to you to invent unique safe words for every larp but from a learning perspective this does not make sense. It would be smart if the larp world could agree on one shared tool-set for de-escalating or stopping a scene. A common non-verbal gesture like the tap-out and a verbal equivalent could be quite helpful

for everybody having problems with memorizing new tools.

**BE TRANSPARENT ABOUT THE PURPOSE OF THE WORKSHOP**

People usually have an easier time with learning if they know why they learn something. Don't make a mystery out of it. If you want players to learn a certain metatechnique, give them concrete examples when and how they can use it during the larp. Explain to them why it will make their experience better.

**CONSIDER YOUR PARTICIPANTS' BACKGROUNDS**

Your players might come from different larp cultures or

they might have different educational backgrounds. Try to create an interesting program for experts which is not overwhelming for newbies. Explain terms that are not part of everyday language.

**PURPOSE BUILT**

There are a lot of workshops around and it is perfectly fine to use them for your larp. However, never forget to adapt them to

your purposes! If you just copy a well-working workshop without copying the whole larp, the risk is high that you are wasting precious time.

Creating a fitting workshop is part of the larp design process and if you do it well, you will provide players with a pathway to your magical land.

□







# LOOKING AT THE SEA

Text: Juhana Pettersson  
Photos: Joona Pettersson

## Echoes of the reality of life under siege in Gaza flicker in the blackbox larp *Seaside Prison*.

"On one wall, there was a video projection of the sea. It would give you the idea of being confined on an island but the sea is an element of freedom as well. It is at the same time a barrier you cannot cross and a symbol of your hopes and dreams."

Designer **Kaisa Kangas** is describing the most striking visual element of her larp *Seaside Prison*. The projection of the waves dominates the black box theater space in which the larp is played, a perfectly chosen complex visual metaphor for the difficult lives of the characters.

### ALTERNATE REALITIES

Two of *Seaside Prison*'s lead designers, Kangas and **Mohamad Rabah**, also worked on the Palestinian-Finnish larp *Halat hisar* (2013 and 2016). Similar to that larp, *Seaside Prison* seeks to make the Palestinian political situation legible for Nordic players through the use of an alternate reality where Finland has been occupied and the new state of Uralia created on its former territory.

This time, the experience is a tightly designed, symbolic larp played in a single evening, seeking to translate something of the experience of everyday life in Gaza, under siege by Israel since 2007.

*Seaside Prison* is set in the Åland islands, standing in for Gaza. It's extremely hard for local residents to leave and the Uralian military is constantly flying drones in the sky, conducting house demolitions and bombing buildings and people.

"Our vision was that the participants would experience a family drama which is interrupted by bombings where some of the family members die," Kangas explains. "The key feelings would then be loss and fear of death. We also wanted there to be a sense of randomness, so we drew a lottery for which characters would die. In one run, the wedding was canceled because one of the fiancées died, and in another, the

bride died during the wedding night."

Rabah noted based on playing the larp that: "It is really difficult to stick to the role of your character as an old person, worker, dreamer, or revolutionary. Once someone dies, all you will think about at that moment is the wish to escape."

### RESTRICTIONS

*Seaside Prison* was supposed to be run in 2020 but became one of the many, many victims of the pandemic. Another attempt to run it was made in the summer of 2021 but that too failed. Kangas explains that: "In 2021 the restrictions on cultural events were really strict in Finland, and since our venue was a theater we had to follow them. The restrictions required a two meter safety distance between participants and it would have been impossible to run the larp with these rules."

The team traveled to Palestine to conduct research

and meet with people from Gaza. They also planned to go to Gaza themselves, a difficult feat because of the limitations on access imposed by the Israeli government. The original plan was to go in December 2019 but problems with the permits made the trip impossible. This sort of uncertainty is common for people trying to get into the area.

*Seaside Prison* is contextualized with videos of Gazan people talking about their lives. They were originally meant to be shot in Gaza but: "Luckily, [the journalist and larp organizer] **Fatima AbdulKarim** kindly organized some interviews in Ramallah with people who had previously lived in Gaza," Kangas says.

For Rabah, playing his own larp was a bleed-intensive experience. "I had a lot of pictures in my mind during the larp about people I know in Gaza. How hopeless they feel, with so little chance to change anything." □

## SEASIDE PRISON

*Seaside Prison* is a larp created as a Palestinian, Finnish and Norwegian co-production.

Design: Kaisa Kangas, Martin Nielsen & Mohamad Rabah

Light design: Essi Santala

Sound design: Hannu Sinervä

Projection design: Joona Pettersson

Workshop leader: Martin Nielsen & Maija Korhonen

Video producer (Palestine): Fatima AbdulKarim

Production assistant: Syksy Räsänen

Duration: 4-5 hours

Participants: 8-16

First run 16.6. - 21.6. 2022 in Helsinki at Theatre Universum

Website: [seasideprison.fi](https://seasideprison.fi)



Text: Wanja Neite  
Photos: Simon Salem Müller VG Bild-  
Kunst Bonn / denialofservice.fail

Your pulse is  
racing. Your  
hands are  
shaking. This  
is your last  
chance:

# HEALING

THE MOST GLAMOROUS  
ENTERTAINMENT SHOW IN  
THE WORLD.

FOR SOME IT'S A NEW  
BEGINNING. FOR SOME IT'S  
THE END.

MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME.  
JUST BE YOURSELF! WE,  
FALCON EYE, WILL BE  
WATCHING EVERY STEP YOU  
TAKE.

THAT WAS EXCITING! THAT  
WAS MOVING! THAT WAS  
MAGICAL! THOSE ARE REAL  
EMOTIONS!

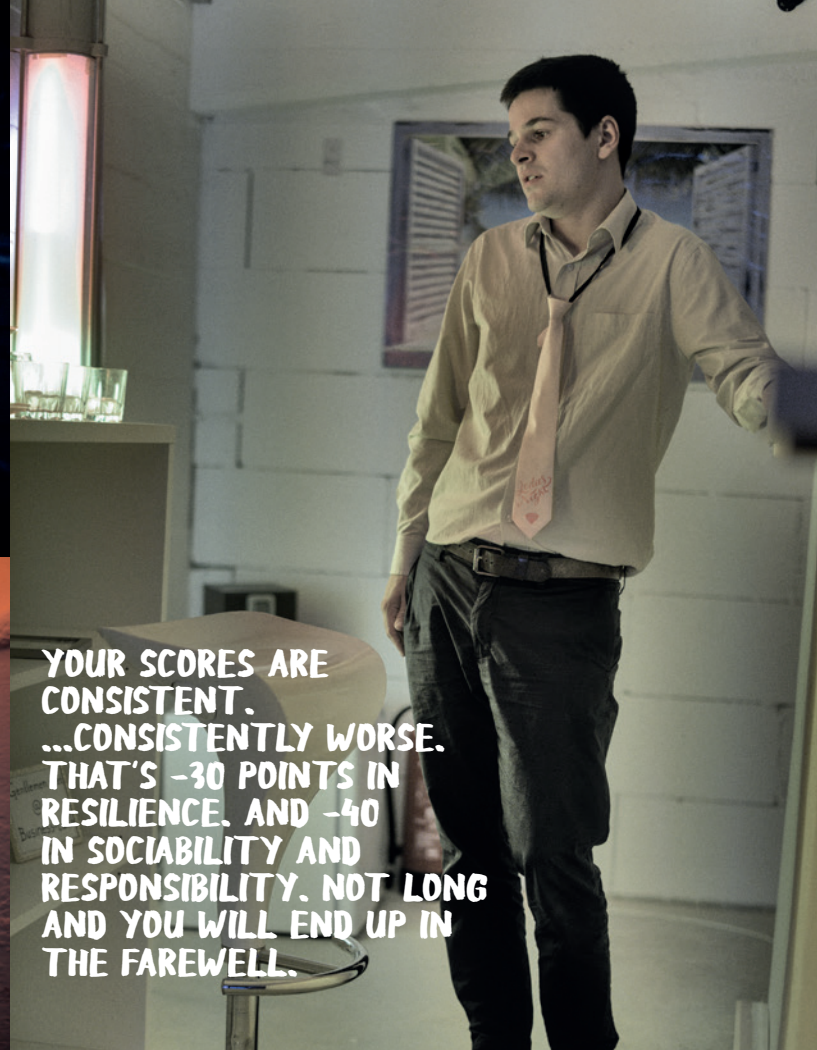
ONCE MORE IT IS TIME FOR  
THE PART OF THE SHOW  
WE ALL ADORE THE MOST:  
THE SCORING ROUND! WE  
LOVE SCORES. YOU AND I,  
ALL OF US – WE LIVE FOR  
THE SCORES!





RAGS TO RAGS? NOT IN THE NATION. LET'S HAVE SOME FUN FUN FUN AND GET YOU BACK IN SHAPE.

WE HAVE SEEN YOU GIVE YOUR ALL. BUT YOU CAN DO BETTER, SM\_741.



YOUR SCORES ARE CONSISTENT. ...CONSISTENTLY WORSE. THAT'S -30 POINTS IN RESILIENCE, AND -40 IN SOCIABILITY AND RESPONSIBILITY. NOT LONG AND YOU WILL END UP IN THE FAREWELL.

## THE LARP

A bunker in an undefined future called *Healing Facility-A13* is the place-to-be / last resort for beings who fell out of the middle of society by having a too low LIS-Score (Social Score). As longtime clients in a game show called *Healing* destiny now is in their own hands, again. Can they impress the "The Tribunal" (online players playing in a specially designed 2D world interconnected with audio and video in real time with the bunker) to lift their LIS-Score and go back in the heart of "The Nation" (society) or do they finally have to go to "Farewell"...

## CREATION

Summer 2021. An international team of roleplayers, performers, scenographers, activists, hackers and creative coders tries to create a larp about a technocratic fascist

world inside a bunker. Outside a not-so-fictional but appallingly similar world is waiting: Schweinfurt in Bavaria, Germany. The city is flooded with bored cops and their civil minions. So the team from the network [denialofservice.fail](https://denialofservice.fail) holes up even deeper to the bunker to create a unique hybrid game.

*Healing* was played online and offline at the same time. Beings from all over the world played online with beings located in a World War II era bunker in Germany. The larp was played six times, open to the public, took 10 hours of your time and was designed for beings without any larp experience, with accessibility in mind and ran solely on open source software. □

## MORE INFORMATION

Check out [denialofservice.fail](https://denialofservice.fail) or visit [healing.dos.fail](https://healing.dos.fail) on the net to get more information about what happened to the clients in *Healing Facility A13*.



**DOS.FAIL**  
IN LIS WE TRUST  
**HEALING**

A13





**We are  
storytelling  
animals. We  
love stories  
and we need  
them.**

# UNFINISHED STORIES FOR AN UNRULY AUDIENCE

Sometimes the secrets in *The Secrets We Keep* were  
hidden in the physical play environment.  
Photo: Luca Tenaglia



There is a potential clash between storytelling and participation. How can something linear and from up to down like stories go together with larp, a medium that is co-creative by nature? Is the larp killing storytelling? Or is it reinforcing it?

There was an interesting and intense debate around those topics before and during the Knutepunkt 2021 in Oslo. We had talks, a playful conflictual panel and long discussions in circles at night. We reflected collectively about the difference between writing and design, understanding that they are not the same thing, even if they can overlap and work together.

We also had interesting discussions about experience and

storytelling. We agreed that maybe writing is the storytelling tool, while design creates experiences. There is still a lot to think about and experiment with in this direction. What can we achieve? Increased self-awareness, reinforcing the idea that we are good at writing stories that are alibis for action. That we need stories with holes, with air. Unfinished stories for an unruly audience. Our stories are like the colorful balloons we play with on the beach. They need someone to inflate them, in order to get them ready, and play with them.

I feel a bit responsible for that, since my Nordic Larp Talks presentation No More Heroes: Larp As a Collective Journey catalyzed a lot of these collective reflections. But the

subject was already in the air, I just made it more explicit in my talk.

To have more points of view on the subject I invited three authors I find very interesting to take part in this article: **Asya Volodina**, **Kathy Amende** and **Simon Brind**. They come from different play cultures and backgrounds, and I like how they approached the questions.

### PLEASE INTRODUCE YOURSELVES!

**Amende:** My name is Kathaleen (Kathy) Amende. I am one of the six designers and owners of Peculiar Crossroads Productions, and we run both weekend-long and one-night

larps. Here in the United States, our events are usually labeled as "parlor" or "European inspired," which is just shorthand for story-based, narrative larps with minimal mechanics.

**Brind:** I have sometimes laid out my credentials so that I am a 19th century Englishman, but I am actually from the second half of the 20th century, from London. I have been making and playing larps since the 1980s. For the last seven years I have been researching how stories emerge during larp runtime and how we can make sense of those stories in real time. I am also a member of Avalon Larp Studio – a non-profit collective headquartered in Oslo, Norway. I have also written for a lot of different larps

and larp organizations across Europe and North America.

**Volodina:** My name is Asya Volodina. I have played and organized multiple larps in Russia since the early 2000s, and internationally for the last 5 years. Among my larps there are big ones like *Constantinople* in 2007, *LifeCost* in 2011 and *Deus Ex Machina* in 2017, blackbox and chamber larps (played both in Russia, and at international festivals), online larps (*SelfConference*, *Merciless Funerals*), and larps in an art context (*1597 Seconds*, *Faf And Tsalar Honoring*, *Low Season*).

### What do you think is the difference between writing and design in larp?

**Volodina:** In writing you have to create a specific story with a reasonable number of details. It is what it is, you are the ruler of it, your audience is just a passive (and hopefully admiring) observer of the story. While designing you create a space for a story to happen. Maybe this one, maybe another one. Using some limits and guidance you can define it up to a point, but the audience has agency in acting, feeling, and understanding the story. You are at best a co-creator. Deal with it.

**Amende:** There is so much crossover between the two. Design certainly involves a great deal of writing, at least the way we do it. And, if you are writing narratively, design is always involved. For me, when I design larps, there are logistic considerations and set design and the use of mechanics. All of these things can be utilized towards narrative purposes, in addition to the writing itself. That's just baked into the structure of larp. After all, some people start with character ideas and build a story around them, whereas some people start with a world and then populate it with stories and people. When we

build a larp, we start with the themes and emotions we want to explore and then build a story around that. But ultimately, the way stories come to life is through the characters.

**Brind:** To avoid further bloodshed I concede here that writing is a part of the design process. It is possible to create a larp that is all design, no story.

I do not believe the converse is true. A larp that was only a story, but with no design, would be a piece of fiction. As we imagine ourselves playing it, the creative process of transposing the written words on the page into larpable action is design. As a part of the overall process, good writing compliments design.

I think it is a matter of preference. In most cases I will start the process of making a larp with a plot. I use the word plot to describe those planned ideas that the creators (designers) of the larp come up with before the larp starts. If you write too much without design you end up with a novel.

The most interesting intersection for me is worldbuilding; this is probably where good writing and good design are almost indistinguishable.

### Do you think there is a difference between storytelling and experience?

**Brind:** Thinking about what you want your players to experience is part of the design process. It is a complimentary surface that larp offers up to us creatively; we can do interesting things with it. I would not seek to privilege experience over story, nor the other way around. Use both. Do them well. Move on.

Storytelling is a part of narrativization. It is something that can happen after the larp has finished. It is a part of the process for understanding the experiences we have had during play. Larp is a big machine. The machine makes stories. You feed raw materials into

Alessandro Giovannucci is one of the key figures behind Chaos League which produced *The Secrets We Keep*. Photo: Kai Simon Fredriksen



one end: players, plot, and characters. You crank the handle and a mince of stories and experiences come out. Emotions are discharged into the rivers. People *bleed*. Memes are posted on socials. The machine is not perfect. It should not be perfect. It must never become perfect. If there were a single, repeatable, immutable, and perfect design for a larp there would be no point to any of this.

**Amende:** I really do believe that people understand everything about the world best through narrative. We share stories to talk about experience, and in those stories, we recreate the experience anew. I'm not much of a Freudian, but **Freud** did bring forth the idea that we imbue every story we tell with both conscious and unconscious symbols that can help interpret our own thought. I would argue that as a species, humans do this to understand the world and their experiences within.

I live in Alabama, a state firmly steeped in Southern tradition in the U.S. One of those Southern traditions is storytelling. Southerners are often known for the way they can take a simple experience and extrapolate it into a much larger event for comedic, dramatic, or impressive effect. So, I guess, what I am ultimately getting at is we use storytelling to interpret experience, and in the telling, we don't recreate the same experience, we create an all-new one both for ourselves and for the hearer/reader/player of those stories.

**Volodina:** In my perspective, the difference is not between storytelling and experience, but between different ways of performing storytelling – in other genres, you can tell a story through a written text or visual images; in larp, you tell a story through experiences. Of course, different types of storytelling are not the same; different tools create different possibilities.

There is a term in game studies, “procedural rhetoric.”



*The Secrets We Keep was a Chaos League larp with a sophisticated narrative structure.*  
Photo: Luca Tenaglia

It means telling a story through procedures. In the case of larps, through play. I believe this is the most consistent way of storytelling for larps. It combines experiencing (feelings, emotions, other experiences) and the use of agency by the player.

If the tools of the “classical” storyteller are dramatic twists and turns, for larp storyteller tools like player and character motivation, building a setting that is at the same moment immersive and action-inducing, building models that help to focus on particular parts of the character's existence, and writing rules that would help players to communicate with the setting and each other in a particular way are more important.

### THE NEED FOR STORY

As larpers we are a peculiar kind of storytelling animal. We are hijackers of linear narratives. We are good at creating experiences, contexts, universes where we can live. We are

explorers, we want to experience the first-person audience.

Maybe we don't need storytellers, but more partners in crime, comrades for our playful guerrilla actions. A larp is an open work that is - quoting **Umberto Eco** - “an act of freedom, at the center of a relational network.” We are storytelling animals. We love stories and we need them. But, as larpers, we also want experiences that are life-changing and transformative. Our stories are made up, but the experiences are true. Our storytelling is decentralized, our narratives are crowdsourced. We are One, none and thousands.

We write, we design, we play. Let's enjoy our collective journey. □

Text: Jamie MacDonald

The holy grail of the art form: the comedy larp! Would you like to make one? Too bad; the genre is elusive at best and impossible at worst.

Since Aristotle's treatise on comedy (which surely included larp) is famously permanently misplaced, I humbly offer my own reasons as to why comedy larp is so hard.

**There's Something About Mary** - Brilliant but has the same problem as most IP: it's driven by a protagonist, while everyone else is basically a straight man. Plus, there's the addition of physical slapstick, which is how larp organizers will end up getting sued.

**Mean Girls** - Could we larp fetch into happening? Small-team-against-the-world comedies are still a small team of protagonists against a backdrop of NPCs.

**Delicatessen** - Sorry, just making it beautiful and French does not save us from the problem of following a narrative of a handful of people.

# CLASSIC COMEDIES AND WHY WE'LL NEVER LARP THEM

**The Thick of It** - Armando Iannucci's pinnacle of the cringe ensemble. We're getting closer here - everyone is horrible, no NPCs! Why not shout obscenities at each other all day and call it a larp? Well, it's only comedy off-game. In-game it's brutality, and by the time you get to laugh, half the players are off-game hurt and the other half have forgotten it's not straight up sado-masochism and are enjoying themselves. And let's be honest, we wish we could improvise the script of *The Thick of It* but we'd end up with *The Office* at best.

**Hairspray** - A musical? So we're going to retain the problem of comedy being funny for the audience whilst not being funny for the characters, and try to cover it up by simply upping the difficulty.

**Key & Peele** - A masterclass in sketch comedy; can you larp it? Small scenes of a few minutes long with exaggerated characters, a simple idea executed to its funniest conclusion, and an openness for the absurd - oh shit, we've just invented improv theatre.

**A Midsummer Night's Dream** - as the Elizabethans knew the word, A comedy is any play that ends in happiness, and with a marriage, too. Leaving aside the monstrous stressful task Of improvising in blank verse, I think You'll find this larp's disqualifying grounds Defined in these words: “ends in happiness.”



# POSSIBLE, IMPOSSIBLE LARP CRITIQUE

Text: Kaisa Kangas  
Illustration: Tonja Goldblatt

Larp criticism often travels through whisper networks. After a larp event, we dissect it in private company but rarely write our thoughts – at least critically analytical ones – publicly. It has often felt like we – as a community – focus more on feedback and documentation than critical reviews, let alone critique.

A proper critique is a well-argued analysis that assesses the larp for a wider audience than organizers and previous players. Its purpose is not to help the designers develop the larp nor to record it for future larp historians but to evaluate the larp in the context of its tradition and place it on a continuum of other larp. Critique should transcend the writer's personal experience and give a more general assessment of the larp.

Desirably, critique and critical reviews should not only evaluate the design but also voice questions about the message and meaning of the larp. Was there a point to this larp? Is it reasonable to think the participants got some insights out of it? For example, in his article "These but the trappings and the suits of woe" – *Tragedy and Politics in Inside Hamlet* published in the book *Larp Politics* Syksy Räsänen relates the larp *Inside Hamlet* to the Shakespearean and Aristotelian

notions of tragedy and concludes that it was more of a moral tale than a tragedy.

Our larp tradition is not completely devoid of critical reviews. They appear in blog posts and documentation books. At some point, the website nordiclarp.org made an attempt to publish more critical reviews. And yet, it is hard to find reviews or critique of well-known larp such as *Baphomet*, *House of Craving* or *Forbidden History* which are run several times.

## CULTURE OF CRITIQUE

In more than two decades of Knutepunkt culture, we have not developed similar institutions of critique as exist in the world of passive art like film, theatre, and literature. In assessing works, the larp community seems to rely on hearsay, impressions and

publicity materials. Larp organizers have many tools to control the image of their work, ranging from documentation to the Week of Stories (a rule which prohibits players from publishing negative thoughts in the week after the larp). When we decide whether to sign up for a larp or not, we rarely (if ever) rely on public reviews.

There are many reasons for the lack of a culture of critique. The community is tightly knit. Few people wish to review their friends' work. Some might worry how writing a review might affect their position in the community or whether negative reviews could reduce their chances to get into larp. A designer might wish to give private feedback to other designers rather than criticize them publicly. It is rarely a good idea to cross the line between making and criticizing art.

It is often pointed out that in larp every participant is a co-creator. Usually it is the players who make the larp, both in the good and in the bad. As a critic, should you evaluate your own contribution (against usual norms of criticism)? Or assess other

players' performance?

Most of us probably would not feel comfortable playing a larp where this was going to happen!

However, you can argue that there is, especially in commercial larp, a clear distinction between designers/organizers and participants, and that different social contracts apply to these two groups. Moreover, the designers/organizers can be to some extent held responsible for player behavior. After all, they choose the participants and prepare them for the desired genre and playing style.

This approach does not remove all challenges of larp critique. Some larp are more difficult to play than others, and it often requires skill to get the most out of a larp. Our traditions are built on assumptions about for example what you can do in a larp and how to react to different cues. Do you need to explicitly say that no murders will happen if the larp is marketed as family drama at a dinner party?

It is impossible to spell out *all* the implicit norms. Often we just learn them through playing.





Thus, people with different backgrounds and player skills will write different reviews. However, this does not really differ from passive art. To write a good review, a movie critic has to understand the genre and the intellectual tradition of the film.

Nevertheless, in larp the extent to which our own actions and attitudes determine the experience is on a different scale than in passive arts. And

sometimes, you have a better larp if you turn some of your critical faculties off. On the other hand, to write a good review, you have to have them on.

What if you were to take frequent off-game breaks to write down notes about the larp? How do you think it would affect your larp experience? Or the way you see the larp, more generally? As a larp critic, you cannot escape self-reflection.

Players often steer their larp towards interesting directions. Can you always be sure whether an outcome results from the design or your own play (or both)? Should the critic pause to

Hype and critical thinking can rarely coexist. If you are to write a review, you cannot strive to see things positively. When you decide to evaluate the experience, you might be already giving up parts of it.

In larps, we have learned to explain away inconsistencies and to play around them. We often steer

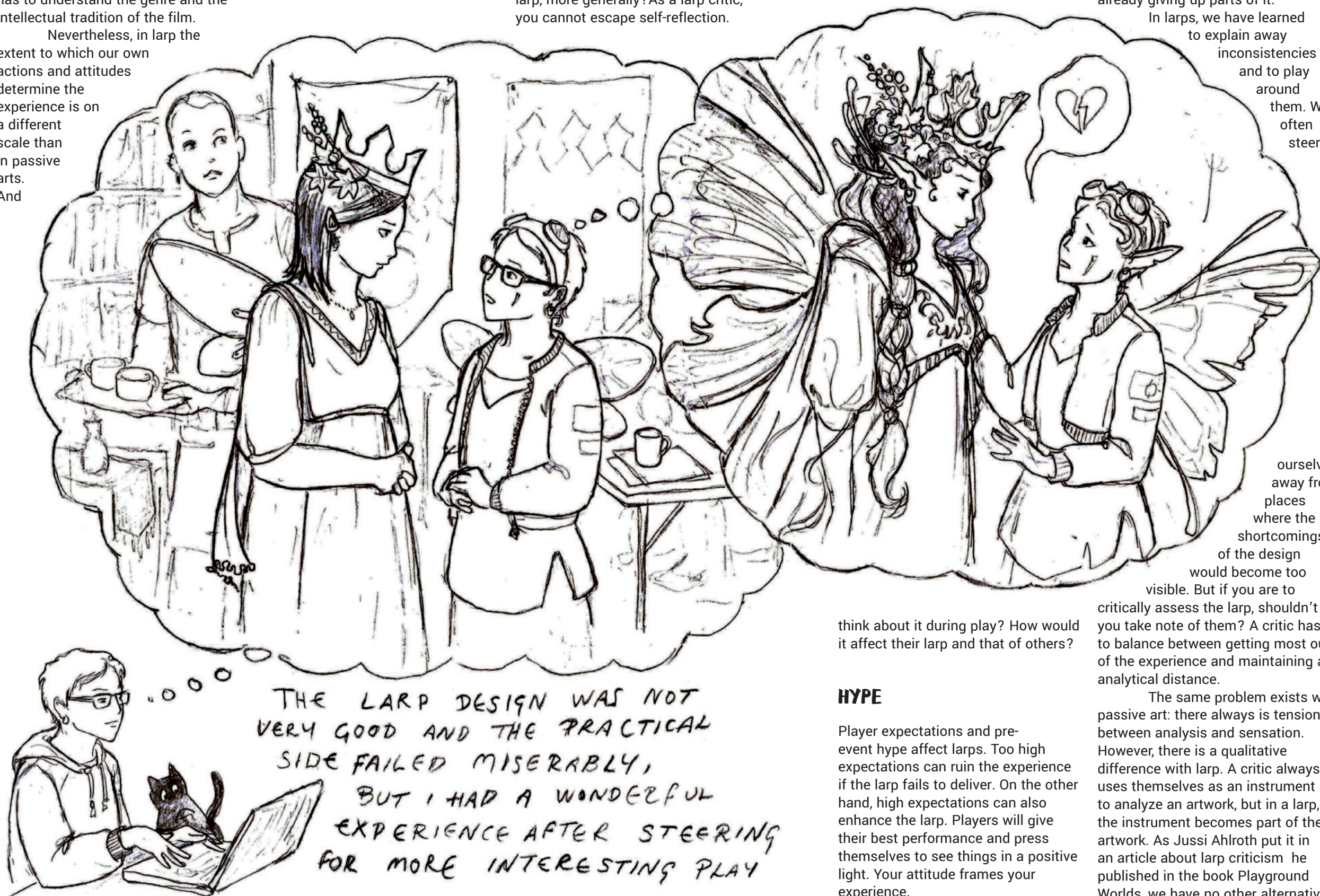
than let the violinist review the concert they were playing in. Moreover, there is no possibility of going back to the objective reality of the larp. The borderline between the things that actually happened and memories/interpretations blurs. In contrast, with a novel, you can always turn to previous pages and read what the text literally says.

These challenges are not a reason to give up attempts on larp critique but they are something to keep in mind. They also partly explain why criticizing larps often is an thankless process. It might also be worth mentioning that there are ways around them. You could use a pen name to avoid community issues. To rise above a subjective vantage point, you might review the larp as a team or interview other participants. Of course, this probably does not make the task more appealing as it adds to the workload.

Is it a problem, then, that larp has no institutions of critique? Lately, there has been more and more interest in larp from inside the arts. For example, in 2016 the Royal Dramatic Theater in Stockholm staged *Gertrudes möhippa* (Gertrude's Bachelorette), a crossover between larp and theater.

If larp is one day going to be part of the institution of art - as some of us hope and others fear - then there will be critique. Will we let people without much experience of larp write it? (A regular theater critic could never have identified the design flaws in *Gertrudes möhippa* that Annika Waern discussed in her review in 2016 on [nordiclarp.org](http://nordiclarp.org))

Or are we going to show them the way by creating our own institutions? □



think about it during play? How would it affect their larp and that of others?

## HYPE

Player expectations and pre-event hype affect larps. Too high expectations can ruin the experience if the larp fails to deliver. On the other hand, high expectations can also enhance the larp. Players will give their best performance and press themselves to see things in a positive light. Your attitude frames your experience.

ourselves away from places where the shortcomings of the design would become too visible. But if you are to critically assess the larp, shouldn't you take note of them? A critic has to balance between getting most out of the experience and maintaining an analytical distance.

The same problem exists with passive art: there always is tension between analysis and sensation. However, there is a qualitative difference with larp. A critic always uses themselves as an instrument to analyze an artwork, but in a larp, the instrument becomes part of the artwork. As Jussi Ahlroth put it in an article about larp criticism he published in the book *Playground Worlds*, we have no other alternative



# OPTIONAL PLAYTIME

**Text: Juhana Pettersson**

In most larps I've been to, time has been either in-game, or not. For example, the larp's schedule says that between 14:00 and 22:00 the players are in-game. They're assumed to be playing their characters.

In the fall of 2021, we ran a larp called *Redemption* in Finland. It was about sin and salvation in pre-revolutionary Russia, set among a cult who believed that forgiveness is key to being saved. And forgiveness is empty if there are no sins to forgive.

Designing the schedule, we designed the morning of the last day so that you could go in-game at 9:30 if you had unfinished business you wanted to play out before the larp entered its final phase. At 10:00, everyone would be expected to be in-game.

At the time, this design choice was just an attempt to balance people's desire to play with the need to sleep half an hour more. Later, I was talking about the larp with the player Oskar Lilliehorn who gave the method a name: Optional Playtime.

## ENABLING PLAYER CONTROL OF THEIR TIME

Optional Playtime is time when you can go in-game, or opt out and relax, eat, talk with friends, sleep, work on your costume, and so on. Crucially, nothing important from the organizer side is expected to happen during Optional Playtime. This means that if you want to chill, you can do so confident that you're not missing out on important scenes.

The method is designed to give players more control over their

time and how they use it. It works best in larps with a lot of transparency so players have the information they need to judge how to best use their time. It also helps if the larps sticks to the schedule and the players can trust that if something is supposed to happen at 18:00, that will hold true.

*Redemption* is not the first larp to use Optional Playtime. I've been at *College of Wizardry* runs where the larp's action ends for the day at 23:00 and the in-game curfew is in effect. After that, you can still play until midnight, at which point all players are expected to go off-game. The mechanism is formulated slightly differently than Optional Playtime but it's function as a tool for the players to opt in or opt out of a certain portion of the playtime is the same.

Examples of possible uses for Optional Playtime are in the morning, in the afternoon which is low-energy dead time in many larps, and late at night. ☐

PLAY-  
ENABLING  
OPPRESSION

**Text: Juhana Pettersson & Maria Pettersson**

the men retire to discuss important issues, leaving other characters outside.

Playing a queer character in a conservative in-game social environment generates action. You can be blackmailed, outed or denounced. You may have to throw your lover under the bus to save your own skin.

These are off course gross generalizations. Sexism and homophobia can easily manifest in the larp's dynamics in the opposite ways too. It's all about implementation and context.

how to approach them to provide the best player experience.

Analysis of in-game oppression design is especially important because if oppression is designed badly, it has a tendency to oppress the people who get oppressed along the same vector in ordinary life. Badly implemented in-game sexism replicates out-of-game sexism, potentially creating a sucky experience for those who are not men.

Could sexism be made interesting to play? Let's say that the larp is about witch trials. Suddenly sexism doesn't manifest in women being shut out of play and made to do the dishes. Rather, it places female characters in the center of highly dramatic scenes, accused of witchcraft, made to stand trial and possibly even burned at the stake in the midst of a furious crowd.

At the core, it's still sexism but it manifests as play in a totally different way. In this scenario, being the victim of prejudice translates into spotlight and action.

Oppression of a group of people is interesting larp design only if it enables rather than disables play for the players of the oppressed group. □

**Sometimes in-game oppression provides great play for oppressed characters. Other times it just sucks. What's the difference?**

When we ran the original version of *Halat hisar* in 2013, we had an interesting discrepancy in how players preferred to deal with oppression based on gender and sexual orientation. Players wanted sexism toned down but homophobia to be open to exploration. We complied with player input but later wondered why this was.

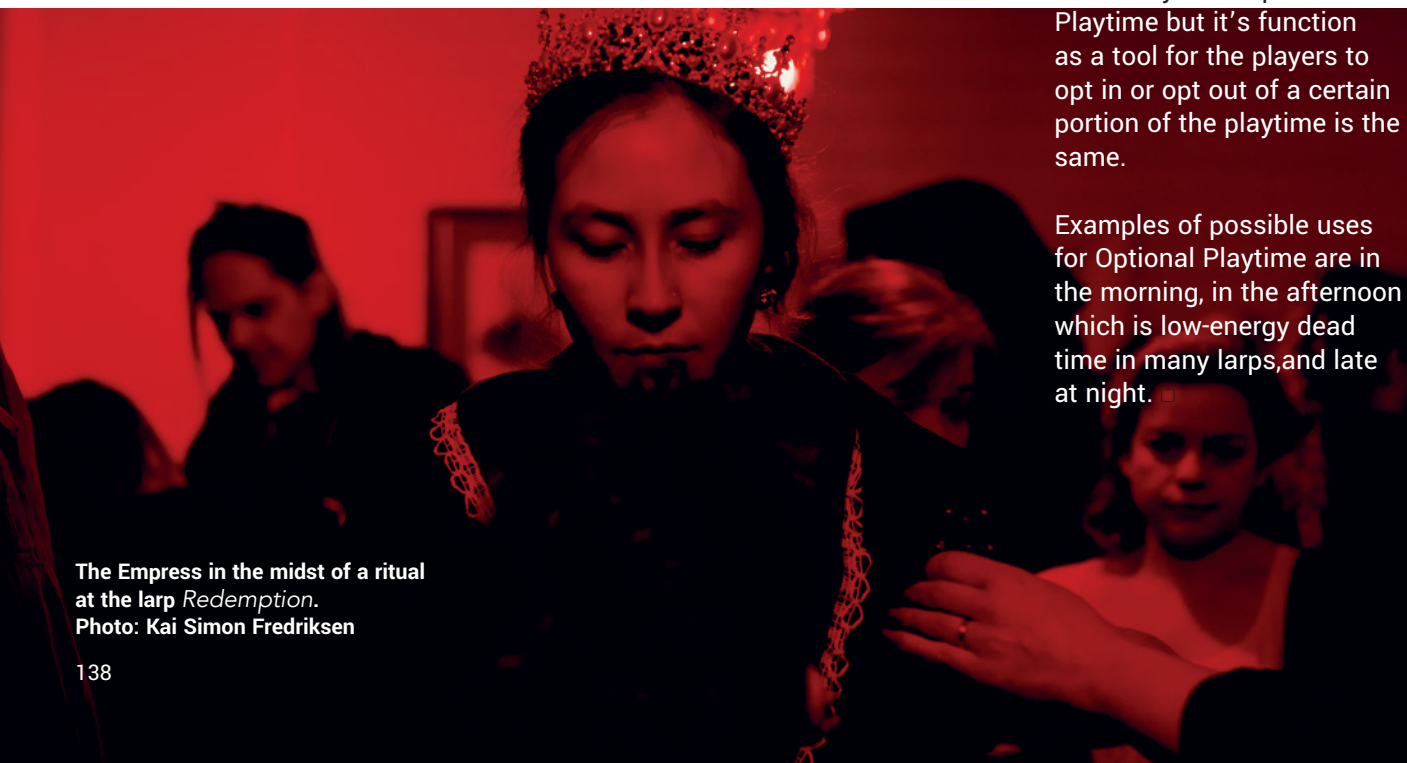
Upon analyzing *Halat hisar*, we came to the following conclusion:

Sexism as an in-game element shuts down play for women and others who are not men. For example, all

## OPPRESSION SHOULD PROVIDE PLAY

Oppressive in-game dynamics should be designed so that they provide the maximum amount of action and larpable content for the victims of the oppression, while disabling opportunities for play as little as possible.

This sort of analysis is especially important when it comes to themes of oppression that are not central to the larp. *Halat hisar* was a larp about life in Palestine transposed into an alternate reality version of Finland, now under occupation. It was a larp about oppression, but sexism and homophobia were not its core topics. We had leeway in terms of



**The Empress in the midst of a ritual at the larp *Redemption*.  
Photo: Kai Simon Fredriksen**



**Using the hand as the focus of sexual play to allow for a wider range of interactions.**

Miming out sex theatre style is limited when it comes to larping non-penetrative, queer and particularly lesbian sex. The purpose of "The Hand Technique" for sex is to allow for a wider expression of different types of sexual interactions in larp.

The way the technique works is that when you want to perform a sexual act on your partner, they place their hand near their crotch or on their thigh, and you focus your actions on their hand. If you kiss the hand, that suggests oral sex. If you kneel, look

The hand technique for simulating sex was used in the larp *Lord of Lies*.  
Photo: Carl Nordblom

up at your partner and touch the hand gently with your fingers, that means pleasuring them using your hands.

The technique allows for subtle and not so subtle off-game consent negotiations. For example, inside the fiction, you're giving oral sex. However, as a player you're not comfortable miming oral sex on a hand that's placed directly above your partner's genitals.

To make the scene comfortable for you, you move their hand so it's on their thigh. This small but important difference makes the scene possible for you to act out.

During play, you can experiment with the technique for different types of sex acts beyond just oral sex. The recipient whose hand is being acted upon can also convey

emotional dynamics by being passive or active.

As the sex scene becomes more complex, it's also possible to switch who's hand is being acted upon.

## PREHISTORY

The technique was first used in the Atropis larps *Libertines* and *Lord of Lies*. From those, it was copied to the Finnish larp *Redemption*. The technique draws inspiration from the phallus method used in the larp *Just a Little Lovin'* where sexual acts are mimed on a dildo the recipient holds in their hand. In that case too, the placement of the dildo can be used to both control the intensity of the scene and communicate different ideas about what's happening inside the fiction.

# REDUNDANT, FAULT-TOLERANT RELATIONSHIP MAPS

**Text & graphics: Jason Morningstar**

## How to make your relationship maps more resistant to players dropping out?

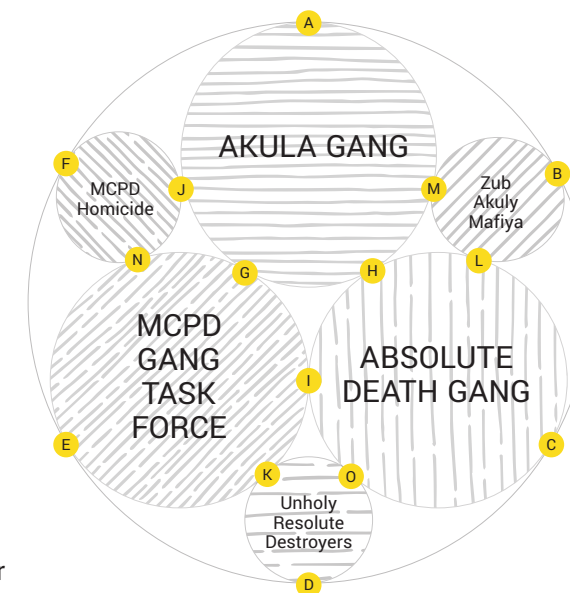
I often see people design brittle larps and then plead for last-minute replacement players “so the game can run”. The design solution for this, from a structural point of view, is to make the relationship network resilient enough to handle a few player drops through redundancy and fault tolerance. Here’s an example of just such a structure, built out for a flexible cohort of fifteen participants.

The relationship map is built around three asymmetrical teams, each of which has two subgroups. The two subgroups within each team are also asymmetrical - a large group with five characters and a smaller

group with three. Around the “edge” is a composite team with one member of each of the six formal groups.

Every character is thematically connected to two groups and four other characters, a manageable and fault-tolerant number. There are many outward-facing connections and allegiances - four out of seven on each team have a direct connection to another team. A number of characters can drop out without impacting connectivity and relationship depth and richness.

Three teams are balanced but inherently unstable, which is nice. You can strip out layers at different known player counts (like A-F can disappear for a 9 player game without breaking any communication channel). 30 players? Two per node, done. Player K doesn't show up? No problem, all



connected players still have three relationships and D/E handle the missing communication channel between the Gang Task Force and the Destroyers.

This also feels like a nice design tool, because it corners you into questions like (for I) "who is the person equally invested in the gang task force and the Absolute Death Gang?", (for A-F) "What's the deal with this weird council of elders consisting of two cops and four gangsters all at odds with each other?", or (for M) "Who is the person at the epicenter of Akula/Zeb Akuly gang politics?"

Let's look at [H]. This character is a child of Rafnar (with a stronger connection Rafnar's wife, [I] than her dad) who is married to an outlawed Skiðisson brother [M]. Her aunt [L] is married to the other Skiðisson outlaw. And she has some connection to a Skiðisson woman married into the Tonbrekka clan, maybe a sister-in-law. In a rigidly gendered society this is a very female-centric character.

Let's say the player of [H] doesn't show up. We say [H] is dead, making [M] a widower. [G], who was a good link from Tonbrekka to the Gođi's people, lacks that connection, but it still exists through [I], the Gođi's wife. [L] mourns her niece but still is tangled up hard with the outlaw husband and brother-in-law. □



**The Unlikely Statement.** If the suspected liar makes a statement that seems highly unlikely, it feels very probable that they are lying. However, in a larp context we can never be certain that our co-players have read all of the material explaining the fiction of the larp, that they remember it correctly or that they understood it in the same way we did. There are also a lot of aspects of the fiction that are not detailed in the fiction documents, where we as players need to fill in the blanks. We can never be certain that we have a joint view of what is

**Signs of Uncertainty.** When someone is lying, especially if they are not very good at it or are in a very difficult situation, they usually show signs of uncertainty. They might wring their hands, bite their lips, glance off to the sides, stutter or even change what they are saying during the conversation. However, things like this are also signs of nervousness, and often occur when we are finding it

At the recently played larp *The Future is Straight* (2021) I found myself wanting to play a capable liar, while still being able to signal to my co-players what was true and what was a lie, and at times invite them to challenge the lies and call

**Hand half-closed, palm facing downwards:** You may come to decide that the difference between the smooth lie (palms down) and the obvious lie (fist) is too stark, and that you would like to have a middle-ground. This is one more gesture for your players to remember, but the scale from open hand to closed fist is intuitive if workshopped.





The design of the hand-signs is connected to our views of how lying looks in our natural body language. Open, visible palms are understood to signal openness and honesty, while hidden palms are not. The reason fists signal a bad lie is because a bad liar is likely to look tense and uncomfortable. Someone who lies well is more likely to have a relaxed, natural posture, hence the relaxed hands with palms facing downwards. □



# COMBAT TOKENS

**Text: Garrett Kopczynski**

# Designing combat mechanics for collaborative mass Vampire.

Translating larp tradition to a new audience can be challenging when you want to achieve certain goals but must untrain learned behaviors. The American larp scene does not have many 'Nordic' style larps, and the goal with the larp *Saturnalia* is to introduce more people to the style.

To reinforce a collaborative conflict style that lifts all participants we approached the design for *Saturnalia*, a city-wide *Vampire: the Masquerade* larp in November 2022, with an emphasis on a reward for playing well with others. *Saturnalia* is a larp about transformation. While Mind's Eye Theater *Vampire* larps are often competitive, *Saturnalia* is about growth and understanding.

Some of the players in the larp are interested in playing combat but we want to facilitate negotiation as a resolution method, with players using their agency to look for interesting outcomes. The token system for combat incentivizes someone to 'lose' a conflict, but on their own terms. The offering of a token, a unique personalized object is a reward for a good story.

## THE TOKEN SYSTEM

The *Saturnalia* token system works by first distributing a token to each participant at the event during the workshops. For *Saturnalia* we intend to use blank, unmarked Domino pieces of different colors (white for most vampires, black for elders, red for werewolves).

The participants are encouraged to grab available markers to work on their token and personalize it during workshops. Participants should put art, words, or other identifying markers on the token to make it theirs. The goal is to imbue each token so as to make it unique and personal. This way, when it's offered to another player as part of the mechanic, it has weight.

Some powers within the system allow for a participant's character to have more tokens, also decorated. During a conflict, a participant offers their token to another participant to have that character 'lose' the fight.

The recipient of the token decides how they lose, retaining autonomy and involvement in the outcome. They do not have to accept the token, and if they offer their own token back, conflict resolution reverts to negotiation (which is the resolution method we want to foster in any case). They cannot reuse any tokens they receive, only the ones they start with. □



# 2YMBOTIC 23MAN

Text: Juhana Pettersson

**"Hello,  
my name is Baloo!"**

Sometimes new trends in larp appear heralded by stormy social media conversations and sophisticated theoretical articles. Other times, they sneak in, spreading without a lot of public discussion.

The last three larps I've played, in Denmark, Italy and Finland, all used symbolic names for player characters. These are not names that are supposed to reflect the naming conventions of any particular culture. Rather, the idea is that the names are memorable, evocative and separate from cultural context.

The use of symbolic names situates the larp in the vague shared fictional world of many international larps that doesn't resolve into any particular country even though the atmosphere is generically European. The reason so many larps go for this kind of milieu is that when players come from different countries, it's often useful for the fiction to downplay their real-life cultural differences. This helps create a cohesive atmosphere accessible to all players.

## EXAMPLES

In *The Future Is Straight*, there were characters with names such as Sunny, Ferret and Chalk. The larp was set in an alternate world that was designed to highlight themes related to gender and sexuality. Because nationality was irrelevant in terms of the themes, the larp wasn't set in any specific culture beyond generic European.

Other names are River, North, Blossom and May.

*The Secrets We Keep* is a larp about children raised in an orphanage, now adults, who meet for the first time in years. When I played it, my

character was called Baloo, the former class clown. Other characters had names like Magpie, Chef, Harlock and Grizzly.

*Seaside Prison* is a Palestinian-Finnish-Norwegian larp which seeks to show the situation of people living in Gaza through an alternate historical setting in which the Åland islands are similarly under siege. Although the characters had last names that came from the Åland setting, their first names were again symbolic. Examples are Honesty and Future. □

# PARTICIPATORY RITUAL VOCALIZATION

Text: Juhana Pettersson

**How to use  
vocalization to  
create a sense of  
shared ritual?**

*Redemption* was a larp about the last days of the Romanovs before the revolution changed everything, at a retreat organized by a breakaway Orthodox sect who believed that to achieve redemption one must sin. The larp's sound design was created by **Anni Tolvanen** who also came up with the larp's signature ritual technique, participatory ritual vocalization.

The core team for the larp consisted of **Maria Pettersson**, **Massi Hannula** and myself. I was particularly happy with the vocalization

technique Tolvanen created because it was accessible even to somebody like myself with no singing ability. As long as I was able to hum O or A, I was able to participate.

Here, Tolvanen answers a few questions about how this technique works.

**Anni, what are the design reasons behind this technique? What's the effect it's intended to have?**

The main goal of the technique was to create an inclusive and intuitive way for all participants to join in on or run their own rituals during runtime. The technique aims to give everyone the feeling of "doing it for real," without requiring time-consuming pre-runtime practice, or previous experience in ritualistic singing or chanting. The technique is designed to blend into the general soundscape of the larp; to become part of it and add to it in a diegetic manner.

Each participant has equal agency to impact the ritual's mood and content through their personal contribution to the shared soundscape. One is not merely allowed to accompany an appointed ritual leader, but to improvise their own content within the parameters of

the technique.

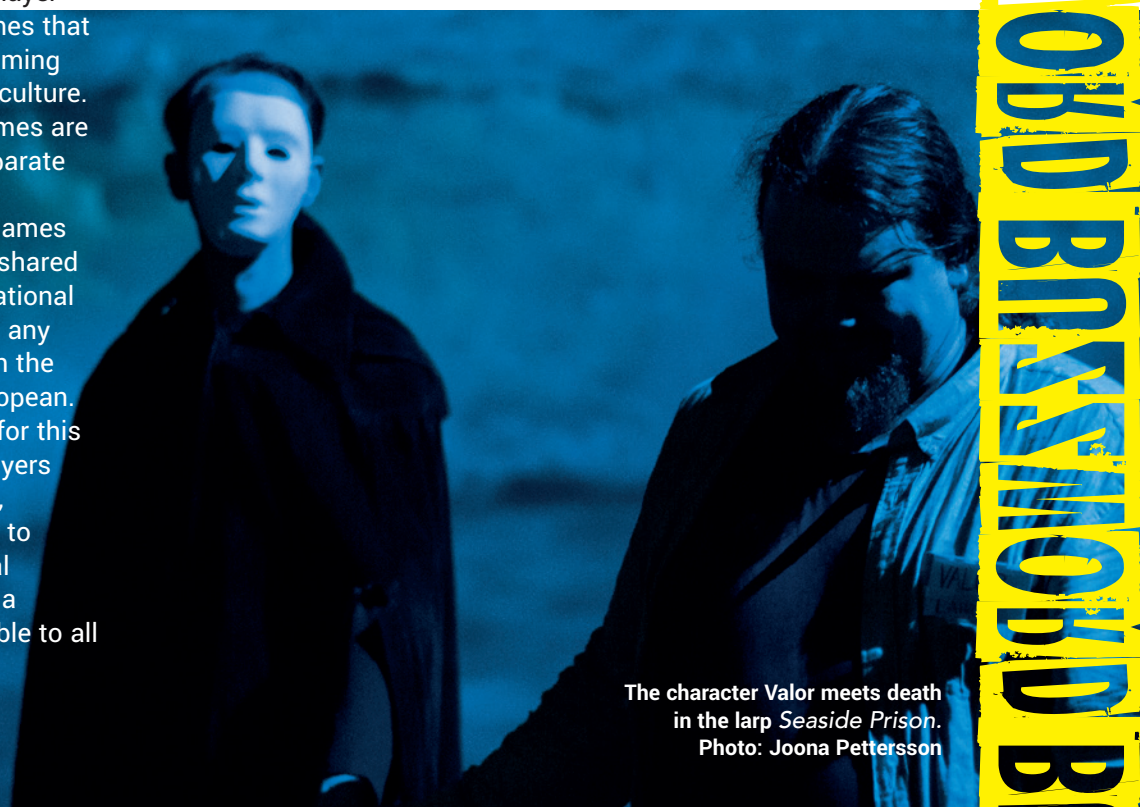
The technique forms an intuitively understandable frame around a ritual scene. By joining the technique you are joining the ritual.

**Can you explain how participatory ritual vocalization works? What do people do?**

All participants are free to start using the technique at any time. When someone starts praying or chanting, other participants taking part in the scene find a shared note to hum. This hum provides the anchor - the drone - to the ritual recital. The drone is collectively carried on throughout the ritual, and does not stop until the ritual ends.

The drone acts as a musical base for the ritual leader or leaders. They can recite and improvise text either by sticking to the same note, or by freely chanting or speaking on top of it. In the workshop for the technique participants practiced a simple musical scale of 2-4 notes while acting as ritual leaders - but sticking to the scale is obviously not mandatory.

Ritual leaders are not meant to be solo performers: Participants doing the drone are also invited



The character Valor meets death  
in the larp *Seaside Prison*.  
Photo: Joona Pettersson



to improvise content, for example by repeating particular words or sentences of the leaders, shouting inspired remarks, or making the drone change in intensity, volume, and tone color.

When the ritual leader wants to end the ritual, they end their recital with an emphasized end phrase (in *Redemption*, “Amen”). This phrase or word is then repeated by everyone in the scene, after which the drone stops, and the ritual is over.

### What's the deeper musical thinking and history behind the technique?

Using one's voice to contribute to a soundscape is an ancient and deeply human activity to take part of. While singing or chanting with others, we do not merely join into making music. We also sync our expression, our internal pacing, and even our breath with others around us. It is a powerful experience, which forms its own temporary magic circle: You join the circle by adding your voice to the soundscape.

Musically speaking, the core benchmarks for the technique are the use of drone notes, improvised recital on top of the drone, and (optionally) the simplistic scale used by ritual leaders. At Redemption, the latter was modeled after the medieval theme "Dies Irae" - a particular four note scale which is nowadays used by composers all around the world to communicate tension, ardor, and

fatality. (In other words, it's a musical meme.)

**How does the technique work if people have wildly varying levels of musical skills? Some have none, others are great singers.**

For practical purposes, singing skill does not have a meaningful impact on the technique. It is in fact advisable to instruct more experienced singers to stick to the basic drone and recital, and avoid more complex musical improvisation.

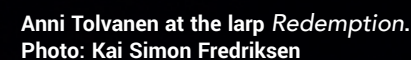
The power of the technique comes from its simplicity. Most people can find and stick to a drone note, and even if they can't, doing things "correctly" is not nearly as relevant as following the collective ebb and flow of the ritual. Everyone's voice contributes to the soundscape, and the soundscape creates the magic circle for the ritual.

## How does the technique interact with the broader soundscape of a larp?

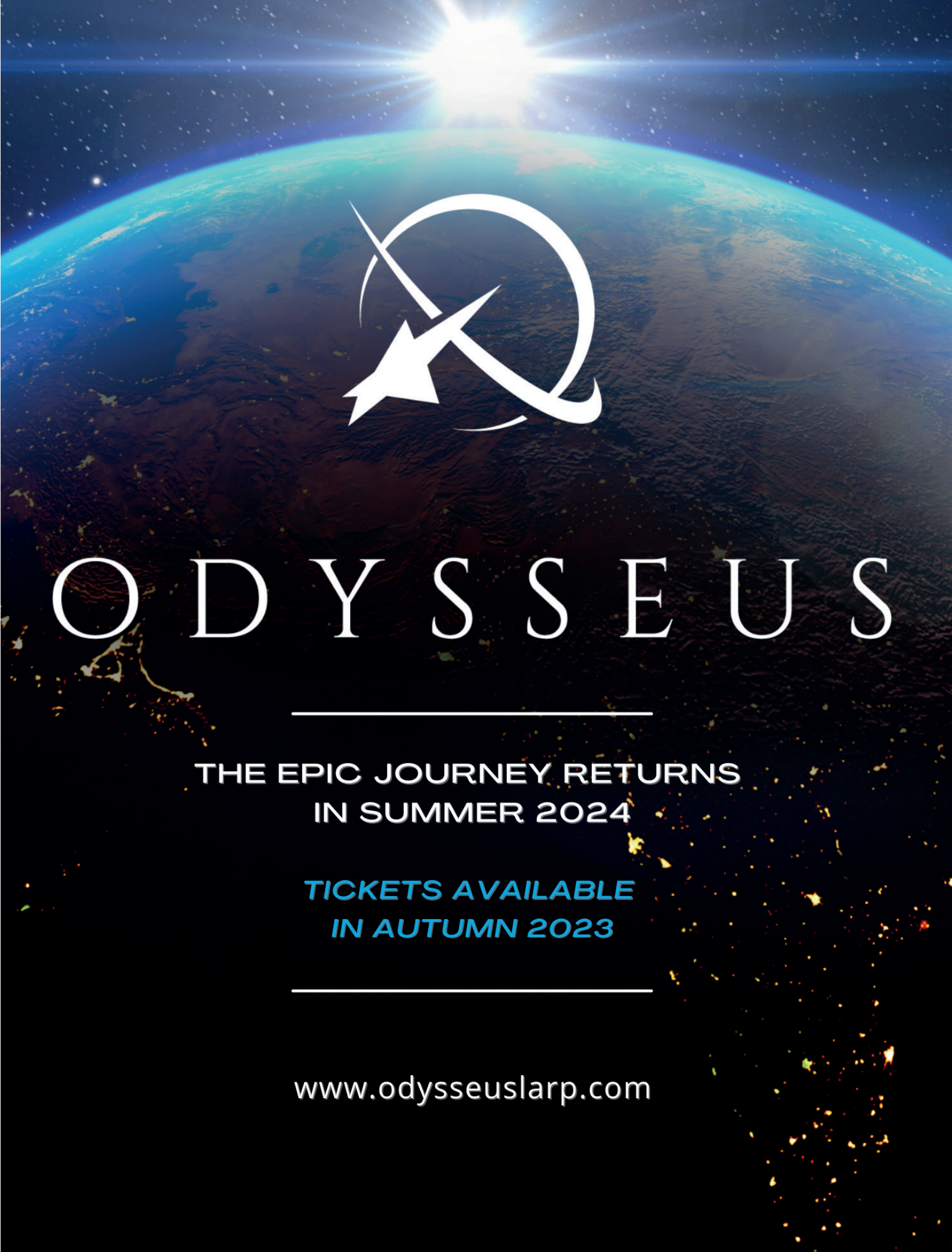
The auditory streams from the ritual (the drone and the recital) communicate

to participants in different spaces that a ritual is taking place. The ritual becomes part of the larp's soundscape and impacts the mood of the larp as a whole. At the same time, any pre-existing soundscape (for example, background music, other participants' activities, other rituals) impacts the soundscape of the ritual.

When implementing background music in particular, some sound design ahead of time is needed. Background noise and ambient music may lower the threshold for using the technique, as participants can lean onto other sounds to find a coherent, shared drone, and get the ritual going. On the other hand, too dominant background music may make it harder for participants to use the technique freely, as music will set boundaries to what kind of sounds make sense during the ritual. □







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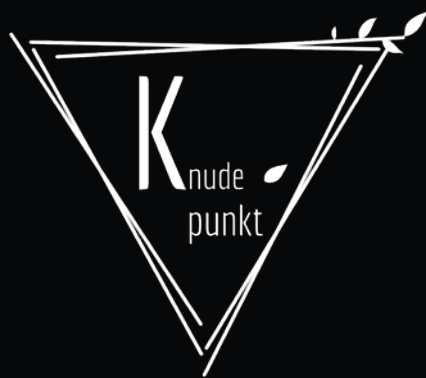
Text: Alma Elofsson & Rosalind Göthberg

# BINGO

Attended a talk or a panel	Cried at a program item	Forgot to plan time for a nap	Got randomly pulled into a program item	Got an idea for a program item for next year's KP
Attended the Opening Ceremony	Attended a program item hosted by someone you'd never met	Dressed up specifically for a program item	Attended a larp	Got to know a new person at a program item
Danced until your feet hurt	Attended a discussion forum	Laughed until your face hurt at a program item	Attended program items in at least five different rooms	Attended a Morning Show
Forgot to plan time for food	Held/helped with a program item	Attended a program item you knew nothing about	Attended an Evening Show	Got a brilliant new idea at a program item
Got stuck talking for ages about a program item	Found a long-lost friend at a program item	Attended a workshop	Attended a program item which wasn't in the program at KP's start	Attended a 1-hour room party

 **DID YOU GET BINGO? YAY YOU!**  
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